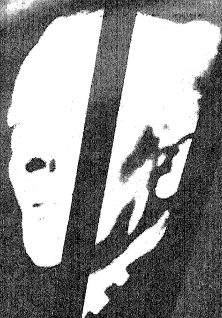


JOHN GODLEY



HAN VAN MEEGEREN:

Master Art Forger



The story of Van Meegeren—"Center of the biggest art controversy since the Mona Lisa theft"—*N. Y. Times*

The Story of Hans Meegeren

Here is a narrative which is more fantastic than any serious novelist would hardly expect to accept it.

But Hans van Meegeren was "a very little man, a little man with no bank balance nor reputation..."

It is a *fact* that he was unrecognized as an artist.

It is a *fact* that he proceeded to paint six spurious "Vermeers" and forge two "de Hoochs" and that these pictures were unanimously hailed as outstanding examples from the brushes of two of the greatest artists of all time. The experts and the connoisseurs agreed on *that*.

It is also a fact that these eight pictures sold for a total of more than three and a half million dollars. One of them, "Christ and the Adulteress," went to Hermann Goering for nearly \$500,000. And that was the sale that eventually turned the art world upside-down, because that was the sale that caused van Meegeren to confess....

Meanwhile, the unrecognized painter calmly accumulated his millions, entertained in a lavish manner, bought 50 houses in Amsterdam and a mansion in the south of France, and turned to drugs and alcohol for deeper excitement.

"What drove him to his task? What methods did he use? How did he dispose of the forgeries? What became of his money? Were the pictures in fact indistinguishable from the Old Masters?" These and other questions are answered in this book.

No less fantastic is the story of his confession. "In the spring of 1945, Allied investiga-

[Continued on back flap]



3 1148 00294 1482

kansas city



public library

kansas city, missouri

Books will be issued only
on presentation of library card.

Please report lost cards and
change of residence promptly.

Card holders are responsible for
all books, records, films, pictures
or other library materials
checked out on their cards.

Master Art Forger

Master Art Forger

The Story of Han van Meegeren

John Godley

Wilfred Funk

New York 1951

Published 1951 by Wilfred Funk, Inc.
381 Fourth Avenue, New York 16, N. Y.

Manufactured in the United States of America
by H. Wolff Book Manufacturing Co., Inc., New York

Contents

INTRODUCTORY	1
PART ONE: 1889-1932	35
PART TWO: 1932-1947	113

KANSAS CITY (MO.) PUBLIC LIBRARY

Illustrations

following page 102

HAN VAN MEEGEREN, A SELF-PORTRAIT
A DETAIL FROM "CHRIST AT EMMAUS"
HAN VAN MEEGEREN IN FRONT OF ONE
OF HIS "MODERN" PORTRAITS
HAN VAN MEEGEREN AT WORK IN HIS
STUDIO ON THE "YOUNG CHRIST"

Author's Note

When I was asked to write this book, by the family of Han van Meegeren, it became clear from the very nature of the story that the collection of material would present exceptional difficulties. I would be writing of illegal transactions which involved living men and women: many of the events took place during the war, in a country under enemy occupation; and, of the money transactions involved, there would be no written record, since agreements were verbal and terms were cash. I found confusion, prejudice, much conflicting evidence; and it is to van Meegeren's son and daughter that I am principally indebted for the material which I have used. To them, Jacques and Inez, my sympathy and thanks.

Calcutta, 1950.

JOHN GODLEY

Introductory

IN OCTOBER, 1947, a grey-haired artist stood before the District Assize Court in Amsterdam; by his own confession, he had painted a series of eight pictures which had been sold for over \$2,250,000 as the work of Vermeer and de Hooch. After a brief trial he was proved guilty, and sentenced to a year's imprisonment. Claims for damages and for unpaid taxes amounted to over three million dollars; his remaining estate was officially valued at about one fifth of that total. A month after the trial, before he had begun to serve his term, he collapsed and was taken to hospital. His health had been bad, he had had a similar collapse a year earlier, and the strain of the preceding months and years had become too great for him. At the end of December he died.

The name of this man was Han van Meegeren † and the completeness of his hoax should be recognized from

† pr. Hun vun Máy-heren. ("Han" is a contraction for Henri or Henricus).

the start. At the time of his confession in 1945, his *Christ at Emmaus* had been exhibited for over seven years in the Boymans Museum, Rotterdam. It had been sold in 1937 for \$174,000 and was now recognized as one of the greatest examples of the work of Vermeer. His later pictures were no less successful. The prices paid for his two "de Hoochs"—*The Card Players* and *A Drinking Party*—were relatively low (\$117,000 and \$87,000 respectively) but their authenticity was never held in doubt. It was with his later "Vermeers" that van Meegeren came into his own. After selling a study of *Christ's Head* for \$165,000, there followed *The Last Supper* (\$480,000); *Isaac Blessing Jacob* (\$381,000); and *The Washing of Christ's Feet* (\$390,000). Finally, Field Marshal Goering himself paid the top figure of \$495,000 for his last forgery, *Christ and the Adulteress*. At no time up to his confession did any expert come forward to express official doubts as to the authenticity of any of these pictures.

The van Meegeren story has been discussed and argued in artistic circles throughout the world. This was not only the achievement of a little-known artist whose work had been placed by competent judges amongst the greatest of all time; through the fact of its acceptance he had attacked the world's confidence in the whole basis of artistic recognition and critique. His pictures had been widely acclaimed; experts and connoisseurs had been unanimous in their admiration; either, then, they were ignorant and incompetent, or van Meegeren's pictures were as good as Vermeer's. If

this were the case, how often had the same thing been done before? How many others had successfully submitted their own work in the name of another better-known? Doubts were at once cast upon every work of art, authenticated and certified by men whose judgment was now shown to be fallacious.

If the story of van Meegeren disturbed the connoisseur, it fascinated the layman; for it was the story of an ordinary little man, a little man with neither bank balance nor reputation who had accumulated a fortune and a notoriety at the expense of those who had refused him recognition. A percentage was retained by agents and intermediaries, but van Meegeren had pocketed over a million and half dollars. He had entertained on a lavish scale and had bought fifty houses in Amsterdam and a mansion in the South of France. What drove him to his task? What methods did he use? How did he dispose of the forgeries? What became of his money? Were the pictures in fact indistinguishable from Old Masters? These and a hundred other questions spring to mind at once.

Van Meegeren's first forgery, and perhaps his greatest, the *Christ at Emmaus*, was begun in 1936, and completed the following year, in his villa at Roquebrune in the South of France. Its painting was preceded by four years of research and experiment. In 1932, disgusted by his treatment at the hands of the Dutch art critics, whom he believed to be incapable of appreciating his genius, and in the face of some moral censure for his personal behavior, he had left Holland and did not in-

tend to return. He was determined to prove that the critics and connoisseurs, whom he regarded as his enemies, were prejudiced and ignorant; he planned to paint a single picture, which the world would accept as the work of Vermeer, and to admit that it was his own as soon as it had been accepted and the critics duped. He believed that thus, and thus only, could he place his convictions beyond doubt; that he would not only discredit the judgment of his enemies, who had accepted as a Vermeer his contemporary painting, but would show them they were wrong in their estimation of himself, who could paint the pictures they believed to be a Vermeer. This was the summit of his ambitions when he embarked upon his plan.

When the *Emmaus* had been completed and sold, and van Meegeren found himself unexpectedly with some \$120,000 in his possession, he had to choose between wealth and the realization of a moral ambition. He had developed a technique, after years of research, which entirely engrossed him; he had found a kind of work which absorbed him completely; he had earned himself a fortune and the prospect of further riches lay brightly before him. On the other hand, if he forfeited these, he would be able at once to achieve the end which he had set himself: to justify before the world his faith in himself and his contempt for his enemies. He deliberated for a while but for a man of his temperament it was inevitable that he should continue; during a period of experiment he turned out two "de Hoochs" and then, recklessly, followed the series of "Vermeers."

It is a fact that, for many years, van Meegeren had regarded the critics as his enemies. It is more difficult to say how much this attitude was justified, though it appears that some among them were prejudiced and venal. There is no doubt that much of his work had in fact been inferior; he was a man of great versatility, but lacked concentration and application. He was continually experimenting with new media and techniques, in some of which he never became proficient; often his subjects were ill-chosen and many of his paintings were dashed off hurriedly, whilst in others which he exhibited he was not yet master of a technique, with which, at the time, he was experimenting. To this there are exceptions: he was a competent portraitist and some of his still-lives have the accuracy and beauty which are marks of genius. Van Meegeren distinguished clearly in his own mind between his serious and his frivolous work, but felt that the critics were unable to do the same. Besides, he was the kind of man who ignored praise but remembered rebuke; he would take good reviews for granted, but would never forget a word spoken against him. Over the years, his hatred grew into an obsession; and it was in this frame of mind that, in 1932, he set himself the task which, if it were successful, would justify his beliefs.

He felt that the standards of artistic recognition were hopelessly astray; that judgments were made falsely and that the value of a picture was related to no intrinsic merit, but to the extent to which the painter was well-known and in fashion. Not only (he believed) were these

self-appointed judges unable to distinguish between the false and true; but having decided, perhaps wrongly, who had painted a picture, they valued it simply by the reputation of the name. He hoped to expose them once and for all, to place their incompetence beyond a shadow of doubt.

There are manifold problems in producing a picture which the world is to accept as the work of a great master who died three centuries ago. The first is artistic: to be able to paint in the same style and with anything approaching the same accomplishment. Others are more technical: to discover the methods and materials used by painters in the seventeenth century and to become proficient in their employment. Even when this has been mastered, other problems remain unsolved. Knowledge of materials and competence in their use, and in imitating the style and technique, would result in a painting indistinguishable from a Vermeer, at the moment when Vermeer completed it. But three hundred years have passed. The canvas itself must be old, yet must bear no traces of a former painting, which might be discovered by X-rays underneath the counterfeit. The paint itself must be cracked and hard; it must be unaffected by the action of alcohol. In the normal way it takes half a century for paint to dry so that there is no trace of oil; how is the authentic appearance of antiquity to be bestowed upon a painting completed yesterday? Van Meegeren knew that his work would be subject to searching examination, to chemical and scien-

6]

tific tests which have been pronounced infallible. How can a new work be made to look indisputably old?

To all these problems he applied himself with eagerness. It was not surprising that he chose Vermeer as his subject. Han himself had been at Delft University; Vermeer was a native of Delft, where he is especially honored, and Han had been brought up to the study and appreciation of the painter, of whose work he was to provide an imitation. He had studied his technique and copied it in his compositions. Vanity drove him to choose Vermeer, for he knew he could set his aim no higher. His subject's history simplified his task, for Vermeer was little studied or admired before the middle of the last century, and little is known of him. He was christened in Delft in 1632 (his birth is unrecorded) and died in 1675 after a life remarkable for its obscurity. The fact that a number of his paintings remained unsold at the time of his death points to a lack of appreciation during his life. Nor did his reputation improve; for many years his paintings could only be sold under the forged signatures of such accepted contemporaries as de Hooch and Rembrandt. It was therefore always possible that a new Vermeer would be discovered, previously attributed to another. Opinions on the chronology of his paintings are extremely divergent, since, of the thirty-eight generally attributed to him, only one (*The Procuress*, 1656) is dated indisputably; but of the remainder the greater part, and certainly the better known, belongs, it is believed, to the last years of his life. The remainder, including *Christ with Martha and*

Mary, now in the Edinburgh National Gallery, probably belong to his early manhood, and there is thus a period during which it is not definitely known, or generally surmised, that he painted any pictures which remain in existence. Van Meegeren fastened on to this fact eagerly; he would remedy the deficiency. There is already a marked difference between early and late Vermeers; as there are already these two styles, what would more suit his purpose than to invent a third? He would fill in the missing period! This, in a way, made his project more difficult; he was proposing to paint a new *kind* of Vermeer, which he must persuade the experts to be authentic. In a way, however, it made his task easier, for he need not copy the identical technique of a known Vermeer, and there was left therefore some room for his own ever-pressing individuality.

Thus the style in which van Meegeren worked was to bear no close resemblance to that of any accepted Vermeer, though there are certain similarities between the *Emmaus* and *Christ with Martha and Mary*. This painting, for example, is the only Vermeer in which the figures are life-size—as they are in Han's forgeries—and, apart from the *Allegory of the Old Testament*, is the only Vermeer to have a religious or biblical theme, chosen by Han in each of his six paintings. Yet these were accepted all the same; the colors and combinations of colors were the same, so was the canvas; besides, there in the corner was an authentic signature, and, for many laymen, that was as far as it was necessary to look.

When he began a detailed examination of the prob-

lems which faced him, Han soon decided upon his principal difficulty. He had complete confidence in his ability, given the correct materials, to paint a picture of the necessary artistic accomplishment. Here, indeed, there would be special difficulties: the need for secrecy, for example, would make it impossible for him to use a model; but he felt that he would succeed as far as artistic problems were concerned. He was already well acquainted with technical details, with the pigments and media employed by Vermeer, and with the brushes and canvases he used; it would be easy to obtain the necessary materials. Han knew that his main problem lay in imparting the semblance of antiquity; how was he to make it appear that the picture had been painted some centuries ago? He knew that it was in this direction that his efforts should be expended, and the first task he set himself was to discover a solution.

There are probably only two ways in which such a result could be achieved. One is to paint a picture using just the same pigments, mixed with the same media in just the same proportions, as were used by Vermeer; to imitate his style and, on completion of the counterfeit, to doctor it in such a way as to give the appearance of age. In this case the paint would be allowed to dry in the normal way and the "antiquity" would be applied by treatment afterwards, by the application of a varnish or chemical which would produce the desired effect. Han decided at the start that such a process could never by itself succeed; that it could never produce the authentic appearance necessary to his purpose. He con-

centrated therefore on the other possible solution: the discovery of a new medium to take the place of the usual oils used. His plan was to paint his picture in the ordinary way, but with the new medium he had yet to discover; and then to bring about the drying of three centuries by *baking* the picture in an oven which he was specially to construct. This is not possible with usual media—linseed oil or poppy oil, for example, which “frizzle” or blister, or the paint discolors as the drying process takes place. A formula was required for a new medium, which when subjected to a severe heating would evaporate quickly, completely and without discoloration; Han believed that only the employment of this method would produce a convincing result.

In the summer of 1932, he set about the systematic acquisition of the materials which he would require. The principal colors used by Vermeer are blue, yellow, white and red; in each case he used a kind of color no longer employed by modern artists in the ordinary way. His famous blue came from lapis lazuli, a semi-precious stone which first came to Europe in the sixteenth century, and which forms the basis of ultramarine. Nowadays this pigment has been practically displaced by a chemical product developed at the start of the last century which can be readily distinguished from the blue of Vermeer. Vermeer's yellows were gamboge and yellow ochre; the former is a hardened resin and the latter a native earth colored with hydrated ferric oxide. Both these colors are now artificially prepared. Vermeer made his reds from cochineal and cinnabar, the latter being

10]

a red stone, or earth, from which vermilion is obtained. Zinc white (zinc oxide) came into use at the end of the eighteenth century; white-lead paint, which was in general use till then, has a greater covering power but is poisonous, difficult to prepare, and easily becomes discolored. All these pigments, and other raw materials, Han obtained locally: he set about their preparation, grinding stones and earths to a fine powder by hand, in the manner of Vermeer. If such pigments are bought today in their powdered form and are not synthetic, they are mechanically ground and each particle is identical. This was the kind of difficulty which Han must discover and avoid; he must grind the stones by hand so that the particles, if examined microscopically, would be found to be irregular and of different sizes.

Han had decided that he would achieve his purpose by discovering a new medium and by baking the finished picture so that it hardened quickly. He built an oven for his experiments, which consisted of a fire-proofed box to contain the picture he was to paint; into it he fitted half a dozen electrical elements and a crude mechanism by which the temperature in the box could be varied. He placed ledges inside on which the finished picture would rest face downwards, its surface within three or four inches of the elements. He believed that the result he was seeking would be achieved by subjecting each picture to heat as great as it would stand, rather than by a longer process at a lower temperature.

At first his experiments were totally unsuccessful. He

began by using orthodox media; he painted several pictures and baked them at different temperatures; he discovered that the oil burned or blistered, and the picture was ruined; several caught fire and were destroyed; at very low temperatures the paint took a long time to dry, and in the lengthy process the whites became yellowish and the brilliance of the blues and yellows faded. The paintings which he used for these experiments were nothing but sketches; he painted them with the Vermeer pigments but naturally took no care with their production. They were daubs involving the principal colors he was to use later; there was no reason, even, to paint them on old canvases. Having tried the more usual oils, he became more adventurous, but in the baking process either his paints did not harden quickly enough, or else they discolored. Han became aware that there would be a definite time for which the finished picture must be baked at a definite temperature; a different result was obtained if he heated two similar pictures, one for a long period at a low temperature, and the other for a rather shorter period at a rather higher temperature. After experimenting with many media, he found that he obtained the most promising results when he began to paint in oil of lilacs.

This discovery had a strange disadvantage. Lilac oil still carries the scent of the flower from which it is derived; as he persisted in its use the studio began to reek of perfume, and he feared that this would rouse suspicion. He made a point of allowing his wife and friends into his studio from time to time, simply so that no

mystery would be created; on these occasions his secret materials would be hidden, but he would never be able to explain the *smell*. He therefore decided that he must take a liking to the flowers, and during all this period there was a vase or two of lilacs in his studio.

With oil of lilacs he came nearer success. This is very volatile; when once it has evaporated it leaves little trace and at the same time it makes paint which is manageable. Most important, however, was the fact that, after heating, the paints retained their freshness; the blues and yellows kept their brilliance and the white lead, which with other media had tended to become yellow, was apparently unaffected. But Han was still unable to subject the pictures to a sufficient heat to attain the degree of hardness he required; the paint still frizzled at a relatively low temperature.

It was not till the summer of 1936 that van Mee-geren discovered the method he was seeking, and which he was to use in each one of his forgeries. He was experimenting with two chemicals, phenol and formaldehyde, which he believed he could use as "hardeners" in conjunction with oil of lilacs. Han mixed the two chemicals in equal proportions, and, after mixing his pigments with the oil, dipped his brush first into the chemical mixture, and then into the paint, before applying it to the canvas. Using this method, he painted an experimental sketch and baked it in the oven; he discovered that such a canvas could be indefinitely submitted to a very high temperature, and that the process sufficiently hardened the paint and did not affect his

colors. Further experiments in this process proved to be satisfactory, and Han now believed that his main problem was solved.* He had already prepared a canvas for his first forgery, by removing the original paint from a seventeenth century picture painted by an unknown artist who had been contemporary with Vermeer. After a holiday in Germany he returned to Roquebrune, and began work almost at once on painting the *Emmaus*.

Of the genuine—or supposed genuine—Vermeers that remain, there is only one which has a biblical theme. This is the little known canvas, now in Edinburgh, which has been mentioned already as belonging most probably to Vermeer's early manhood. Van Meegeren intended that it should be supposed that this picture—perhaps the last of his early period—marked the beginning of a religious phase, of which the later paintings had been lost over the centuries. Each of his "Vermeers" was to have a religious subject; and the experts fell eagerly into his trap. The subject which Han now chose was Christ and the two disciples at supper in Emmaus. This subject had of course been painted before, and the composition by the Italian Caravaggio bears some likeness to Han's picture. It is here interesting to remark that, so long as his work was accepted as a Vermeer, connoisseurs discussed with interest whether Vermeer had been *influenced* by Caravaggio in his *Emmaus*; whether, indeed, it was possible that he had seen the Caravaggio, since there is no certain record that Vermeer visited Italy. As soon as it was

* See further chapter VI, pages 128-129.

known that the canvas was by van Meegeren, it was without question affirmed that he had seen the earlier painting, and had in part copied it. This was indeed true. Han had seen the Caravaggio during his visit to Italy in 1932, and he believed that the same subject would suit his purpose admirably. For he foresaw the arguments which would follow; and he realized that, indirectly, they would assist the credentials of his picture. The very discussions which he foresaw, of the influence of Caravaggio upon Vermeer, would help him by their implied acceptance of the fact that his painting was indeed authentic; in such arguments, the real question would be forgotten beside a second question which assumed the affirmative answer to the first. It is important to remember, however, that one well-known painter is *influenced* by another; a little-known painter merely *copies* him.

Han had decided, before he began to paint, that he could use no models; no models, that is to say, except for himself. He insisted above all that this work should remain secret. He had mirrors in his studio, which he could arrange in such a way that he could see his own reflection in any attitude which he required. The figures are himself; the faces are imaginary,* though you will find their likenesses in his own earlier work, and some were sketches from models outside his studio and the sketches copied in his canvas. Accessories such as the table and cloth, and the jug of wine, Han bought for

* With one exception; see chapter VII, pages 133-135.

the purpose and brought to the studio. For the garments he relied upon his own imagination.

Now as Han worked on the old canvas the composition began slowly to take shape. The central figure was Christ, breaking the bread and blessing it; a disciple to the left with his back to the artist, another on the right, adoration in his eyes. Next to Christ, a woman pouring wine, yet withholding for a moment while the bread is blessed. Han made sketches of each of these figures, learning each time to place the mirrors so that his own reflection appeared in just the position which was required by the composition.

In the course of his experiments, Han had succeeded in eliminating the difficulty which he had feared, of a paint which would dry with exceptional speed on his palette, and which would mean that the forgery must be hurriedly completed. After four years of experiments, the painting of *Emmaus* occupied a further six months. Here was none of the discouragement which he had experienced before; this was not monotonous, but absorbing work which Han loved better than any other. He was submerged in the seventeenth century: surrounded by antiques, by ancient glasses and pictures, by the chemicals, paints and pigments which had then been used, so that his studio acquired a strange appearance which would have amazed a visitor. But Han ensured now that no one under any pretext should enter his sanctum. He sent his wife on a long holiday to friends, having persuaded her that she needed a complete change and that he himself required loneliness

16]

for a while. Throughout the summer months of 1937, Han was entirely engrossed with his task. He hardly left the villa except for hurried and irregular meals. He knew that he was engaged for the first time upon work which, if it were successful, would bring him fame, notoriety, revenge—gifts which he desired above all others. For the first time since his early student days, when he had naively expected that he had only to paint to receive the enthusiastic plaudits of the world, he was engaged on work which was more important to him than anything else in life.

When at last the picture was completed, van Meegeren subjected it to the heating process and put the final touches to his work. He turned his attention to the manner in which he could secure its acceptance, since he must be able to explain how such a magnificent painting had remained unrecognized for almost three centuries. He did not wish that his name should be associated with it, for, as ever, he was in ill favor with the experts to whom it must be submitted and he feared their suspicion if they knew that he was connected with it. Soon however he had decided upon a plan of action: he took the forgery to Paris, where he visited a solicitor to negotiate its sale. He said that he had bought it from a once wealthy French family who had been compelled to break up their estate; he had undertaken, however, not to reveal their identity, since they did not wish that their circumstances should be known. He mentioned the distrust which existed between him and the experts, and suggested that it might be said that he was acting

for the family. The solicitor agreed, and with remarkably little difficulty secured a certificate from the well-known but ageing Dr. Bredius that the picture was a Vermeer. Soon afterwards it was exhibited in Amsterdam and bought by the art dealer Hoogendijk; at the end of 1937 he sold it to the Boymans Museum for 520,000 florins (\$174,000), the cost being shared by the State and the Rembrandt Society.

Shortly afterwards, the London paper *The Connoisseur* was to write of the *Emmaus* in a special article: "It is a strange fact that so important a work by this very esteemed master, has been ignored for such a long time." There is, of course, a number of very strange facts about the whole business, and this is certainly one of them. But another which seems more remarkable is the ease with which this whole series of pictures was to receive the mark of acceptance from those who were qualified to give it. It is without doubt true, in the case of this first picture, that there were many excuses which Dr. Bredius might offer. It had been prepared with great care and application, by one who was at the same time a good artist and a good technician; by one who was a painter and had a knowledge of restoring, who failed neither on the score of technical ignorance nor artistic incompetence. It is less easy to understand how some of the remainder of Han's forgeries came to be accepted, which were far less competent in every way. In more than one case, for example, he did not bother to remove at all the painting which existed previously on the canvas which he used; he simply painted over it;

18]

the original picture can at once be detected if it is X-rayed, so that it can only have received a very cursory inspection. Yet these later paintings were to fetch far more than this, his first and by far his best picture.

It is hard to believe that there are those who still hold to the opinion that, though the remainder were certainly painted by van Meegeren, two of the forgeries are in fact Vermeers: the *Christ at Emmaus* and the *Last Supper*. This belief is founded upon the fact that they are the best in the series, and also that with the passage of time the remainder have begun to show signs of deterioration, while these retain their original freshness. When work was in progress on the *Emmaus*, van Meegeren retained evidence, in case the fact should be disputed, that he had in fact painted the picture; he cut a narrow strip, $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches wide, from the left-hand side of the canvas. This he would keep, to be used later on as an indication that he had painted it himself, to be produced as evidence when the moment came. At the time of his confession Han called for this piece of canvas so that his claims could be proved true; there was other evidence besides, but this (he believed) would be conclusive. His villa was ransacked; the strip of canvas was never found. None the less it was officially determined by an international commission, which possessed all available information, that the eight pictures were in fact forgeries. These experts were as fallible as any others; but the further question must be answered; if Han did not paint these pictures, where in fact did he find them? There is the possible suggestion that he dis-

covered them in the collection of some little-known dealer who was unaware of their potential value and who parted with them cheaply; and that he sold them as Vermeers with the intention, later, of claiming them as his own. Can it be believed, or is it psychologically consistent with his nature, that to gain notoriety—already secured by his later fakes—he would be prepared to forfeit almost \$600,000 received for these two pictures, which he had made, so to speak, honestly? Can it be held that no one should come forward to claim that they recognized one of these pictures as having previously been exhibited in a gallery or collection, or that they had in fact sold it to van Meegeren? One other matter may be mentioned here. Such small traces of phenol remained in the paint that none was discovered in routine chemical tests. But when Han told the chemists that he had used phenol in his formula, so that they knew what they were seeking, they were able to find traces in the *Emmaus* and the rest. It would be difficult to explain its presence if the paintings were authentic.

The *Emmaus* and the *Supper*, whose inauthenticity is now sometimes held in doubt, were the first and fifth to be completed by van Meegeren. The second and third were "de Hoochs," and the fourth, *Christ's Head*, was a study for the fifth. As it is known that much greater care was taken with these early forgeries than with those which followed, this appears more likely to account for the fact that they are standing up better to

the test of time, than the supposition that they were painted by Vermeer.

During the two years between the completion of the *Emmaus* and the outbreak of war, Han continued his experiments. With a part of the fortune he had gained, he bought a mansion in Nice where he moved in 1938. It was here that he abandoned his original plan of admitting to the *Emmaus* as soon as it was accepted; the possession of such wealth was too great a temptation and besides he had become fascinated by his work. He did not believe that his technique could be improved, but was interested to discover if he could produce the work of others with equal success. He turned out a "Hals," two more "Vermeers," a "Terborch" and two "de Hoochs", but of these only the last named appeared on the market; the remainder were discovered in Nice after the confession, and it seems likely that Han never intended to sell them, believing them of an insufficiently high standard. The two "de Hoochs" went to Mr. D. G. van Beuningen and Mr. W. van der Vorm, both of Rotterdam, in 1939, and the sums paid for them reached the impressive total of 510,000 florins (\$204,000).

Han van Meegeren returned to Holland under the threat of war, taking with him his wife (who was kept in ignorance of the entire proceedings) but leaving behind in France the greater part of his possessions. It was during the Occupation that he was to produce the remarkable series of pictures which were to seal his fame—if so it may be called—to earn his fortune, and to lead in the end to his confession and conviction. In 1940 he

began to paint again, and in the four years which followed he completed the five "Vermeers" which were to be sold for an aggregate of 6,370,000 florins (about \$1,911,000).

Here it must be emphasized that the conditions under which Han was working are of considerable importance to the story. They provide him with no excuse for his activities during the period—if excuses are required; indeed he almost certainly determined to continue his work before the Occupation took place. The conditions are important because they made his success easier; they explain to some extent why it was possible to paint and sell five forgeries in four years, and sell them for fabulous sums. Every rule of life and every standard of morality was changed, each hope and each ambition: it became a patriotic duty to deceive; valuable property was hidden to prevent it from falling into enemy hands, and business deals and transactions of any kind were conducted in secret, by word of mouth, often illegally. There was an air of conspiracy which infected everyone. Meantime, faith in the value of money fell, for all remembered the disastrous inflation after the first world war and there was the continual possibility that money would become valueless, or halved by rising prices. If anyone possessed an accumulation of secret wealth there was the possibility that banknotes would be called in by the Germans, and awkward questions asked. There was no stability; in theory all was controlled; in fact, illegal transactions were the order of

22]

the day and it was natural that dishonesty should prevail.

In addition it is of course true that the temptation to spend the money Han received, was increased, to forget his original purpose, to go recklessly and without shame from one painting to the next, amassing his fortune which must be transferred, when possible, into bricks and mortar, into material whose value might not fall; till the whole thing was beyond his power to control, something which the once-penniless artist could not understand, except that he was wealthy beyond dreams, and possessed more money than he knew how to use.

As he went from one success to another, van Meegeren became more and more self-confident, and felt certain that his secret would never be revealed. The *Head of Christ* was followed by the *Last Supper*; then came *Isaac Blessing Jacob* and the *Washing of Christ's Feet*; finally the *Adultrous*. The possibility of a confession drifted further into the background; Han took less care with the production of his forgeries and was amazed to find how easily they secured acceptance. It might be imagined, when a new Vermeer was being "discovered" each year, and when no previous record of its existence was available—since on each occasion van Meegeren invented the same kind of story which he had told in the case of the *Emmaus*—that, even in war-time, a buyer would insist upon a thorough examination, and would do his utmost to discover the previous history of the picture, before parting with a fortune.

Yet they were eagerly snapped up, almost without investigation.* Van Meegeren may have felt that the time might come when one of them would fail to gain acceptance; but he felt no apprehension about the past. He had a perfect explanation if the truth were discovered about any one of the forgeries: he could say that he had sold it in good faith, that he relied upon the judgment of established experts who had called it an original, and that he was bound by the terms under which he had himself acquired it, that he would not reveal its source under any circumstances. Thus he believed that his position was secure; thus, so long as he desired, he would never be found out.

And indeed he might have been justified in this belief, had it not been for his last forgery, *Christ and the Adulteress*, and the unexpected chain of events which followed its completion in 1943. After passing through the hands of two intermediaries, it came into the possession of one Walter Hofer, a German dealer who was employed by Goering; and through Hofer it was sold to Goering for \$495,000. Thus the picture was found in his collection by Allied investigators in 1945.

The German leaders had acquired, in their occupation of half Europe, a vast quantity of property of all kinds to which their right of possession was to a greater or lesser degree disputed. Much was simply stolen. Some had been bought at prices far below its true value, or a price had been offered, and never paid.

* See the account of trial, chapter XIII, especially the evidence of Dr. D. Hannema.

Sometimes, but rarely, pictures and other treasures had been paid for in full. It was the task of investigators to consider in detail each of a thousand cases, to discover the history of each object, and to return it to its true owner when such action was justified.

On Goering's collection this commission focussed its particular attention. More as a shrewd financier than as an artistic connoisseur, he had amassed a collection which has been valued at \$300,000,000, scattered in hiding places all over Germany. Generally these were vaults or subterranean chambers, where the treasure might be safe from Allied air attack; the principal cache was outside Salzburg, near his Berchtesgaden villa, and here, in May, Han's *Adultress* was discovered.

Interest was aroused as it was signed by Vermeer, and yet appeared in none of the reference books as a known example of Vermeer's work; moreover a record existed that it had been sold at a great price, and it was this receipt which interested the commission. It proved that the picture had in fact been sold, and afforded the first clue for tracing its history. The Dutch members of the commission were anxious to discover how such a national treasure had fallen into enemy hands, and the chain of intermediaries led them in the end to van Meegeren.

And here he was betrayed by the unexpected circumstance; the persistent law-breaker makes *one* mistake, or fails to provide for *one* contingency. The stories which Han had concocted were adequate to the purpose for which they were devised: they had only to secure the

acceptance of each picture, so that it would not have mattered irretrievably if on one occasion one of them had not been believed. It was entirely for the purchaser to decide; if he accepted the story told by Han, well and good; if not, and he demanded more details of the picture's history, Han could simply seek another less careful buyer. No criminal charge, but only the acceptance of his picture by one customer, depended upon his invented story gaining credence. He had never foreseen that he would be questioned about a forgery in connection with quite a different charge; not with its inauthenticity but with the then more serious offense of collaboration with an enemy. His refusal to give further details would imply his guilt, and could not be simply shrugged off with the proposal to seek another buyer elsewhere. The authorities were not interested in the genuineness of the painting—this was not in doubt; they were concerned with the question of whether he was a traitor, and this it was more important to disprove.

Van Meegeren alleged that he had bought the picture before the war from an Italian family, but refused to reveal their identity. This was an unfortunate choice, for it underlined the suspicion which already existed; it was at once surmised that he had acted as an intermediary between Nazi sympathizers in Germany and Italy. It was no more than suspicious that this picture had ended in the possession of Goering, or that he had bought it in Italy; but between them these two circumstances were sufficient, in the eyes of the authorities, to

warrant his arrest. He was imprisoned on 29th May, 1945, a few hundred yards from the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

It was here that he broke down. Again and again he was questioned and denied the charges—charges of collaboration, since there was never any suggestion that the picture was a forgery—and was denied the sleeping tablets on which he was by now reliant. In the end, the confession came tumbling from his lips; to avoid his accusation, which was completely unfounded, he told the full story. “Spurred by the disappointment,” he began to write, “of receiving no acknowledgment from artists and critics for my own work, I determined to prove my worth as a painter by making a perfect seventeenth century canvas.”

It was more than two years before van Meegeren was brought to trial. In two months, between August and October 1945, he painted before judicial witnesses a seventh “Vermeer,” the *Young Christ Teaching in the Temple*, to show that there was at least the possibility of truth in his allegations. It was adjudged of as high a quality as those which had gone before. An international panel was established to examine all the pictures; chemists and scientists were called in, but found it difficult to reach a conclusion. Van Meegeren was allowed a limited freedom. The trial, expected in May 1946, was several times postponed. Van Meegeren was declared bankrupt and there was a meeting of creditors in February 1947, when claims were considered which already reached \$2,100,000. Meantime, controversy raged;

his story was front page news in a dozen countries. Once he had been cleared of charges of collaboration, van Meegeren was widely admired and applauded; a poll taken by a leading Dutch newspaper showed him to be second only in popularity to the Dutch Prime Minister.

At last, in October, 1947, the trial took place; the verdict was a foregone conclusion and Han, as much as anyone, desired to be found guilty. The international panel announced its findings; statements were made by those who had featured prominently in the case; the evidence all pointed to the same conclusion. The court adjourned after sitting for only a day; on 13th November the verdict was announced; van Meegeren was guilty and was sentenced to a year's imprisonment. The question of damages, for those who had bought the forgeries, would be considered separately. Han returned to his home, and a month later, when he had not yet been taken to serve his term, he collapsed and was taken to hospital with angina pectoris. In hospital he at first made steady progress but relapsed soon after Christmas; and at the end of the month he died.

In the chapters which follow it has not been my aim to provide a technical analysis of van Meegeren's work, nor a detailed appraisal of his pictures. I have written for those who are interested in him as a man, and I have tried to put forward the many problems—moral, artistic, psychological, intellectual—which of necessity arise. I have written for those who are fascinated (as I was) by the whole strange story; it is not surprising that I should discuss in some detail, for example, the dif-

28]

ficulties faced by the young painter, or the writer, or composer, who is trying to secure recognition and is faced with a hostile and impersonal world; with the disappointments and disillusionment which he is bound to experience, and with the gradual and painful progress which he may make if he is fortunate. The attitude of the public to the artist—and the word is used in its fullest sense—is a strange and contradictory one. To attend the opera, to be able to appreciate a fine picture, to be well-read; these are believed to be necessary parts of a civilized and educated personality; yet the man who creates these things, who is himself responsible for them, is regarded with a disapproval which is seldom tacit. It is customary to speak of the “long-haired brigade,” of the “Bloomsbury Boys,” with an inflection which expresses little more than pity or contempt. It is hardly surprising, when such an attitude so widely prevails, that true appreciation is a rare gift, that the many rely upon the judgment of the few, and that if these make a mistake, then the rest follow blindly on their heels.

There are those who insist that van Meegeren was a genius; a genius of an unusual kind, and at an entirely original craft; but a genius all the same. There are those who believe that he was simply a rogue; that his only desire was to amass a fortune, that the paintings themselves are third-class, and that they secured acceptance chiefly because they were offered for sale during the war, when everyone was anxious for patriotic or economic reasons to invest money in works of art and when deals of this kind were secretly transacted; so that they re-

ceived a less careful examination than might otherwise have been the case. It is easy, too, to write of a *misguided* genius, but such an expression inadequately describes van Meegeren. When he began to paint the *Emmaus*, he had for the first time a spur which enabled him to put all his power into the accomplishment of a great picture. There is little doubt that this was his finest work; that it is superior to any of his "own" pictures. His hatred was an obsession; he was determined beyond everything to succeed. Therefore he *did* succeed; for the first time in his life, there was a sufficient driving force behind him. To speak of misguided genius is itself misleading, since it implies that, had he desired, he could have produced the same masterpieces under his own name. It was because he had a sufficient purpose that he was able to succeed; this purpose was the deception of his enemies; were it absent, or the aim altered, he could never have achieved the same results.

It is probably true to say that had exactly the same pictures been offered for sale as van Meegerens they would have attracted little attention. They might have been described as "clever" or "interesting" but they would not have been hailed as original masterpieces. What's in a name? Almost everything; that is my conclusion. An artist, or a writer, or a candlestick maker achieves a reputation; without doubt it is deserved; thereafter all he produces is acclaimed. An unknown craftsman chances to produce an equivalent work; it is ignored. I believe that this is a commonplace; van Meegeren set out to prove that it was true; I believe that he succeeded. This

30]

might not have been the case if he had stopped at the *Emmaus*, if he had been content with *one* "Vermeer", or if his subsequent forgeries had been up to the same high standard. Then it might be said that an excuse was present for his dupes, that here was a man who, by a strange fluke, could in fact produce a Vermeer. As it is, the important fact which emerges from the story is not that he could produce this first picture, though technically and artistically it was near-perfect. It is more significant that he was able to secure the acceptance of those which followed.

The incompetence of the critics is more important, and more certainly shown, than the greatness as an artist of Han van Meegeren.

The pictures themselves have been returned to their owners; the *Adultrous* and the *Young Christ* have passed into the possession of the Dutch State. There is no proposal that they should ever be exhibited, despite the public interest which they would inevitably arouse. In Holland, in London or New York, there is little doubt that they would attract large audiences, not only through the notoriety which attaches to them, but through a genuine appreciation of genuine works of art. If true delight were derived from beholding the *Emmaus* when it was still a Vermeer, then the same delight should still be awoken, now that it is a van Meegeren. Han's family is unaffected by the strange new value, which was suddenly discovered soon after his confession, in original van Meegerens; some of his paintings and drawings, in reproduction, had always been popular in Holland, his

birds and animals were often to be found on calendars and Christmas cards, and his *Deer* is well-known everywhere. After his confession all were at once assailed by a new appreciation of his work, and an altogether unexpected desire to buy anything associated with him. Every dealer looked through his dust-covered stocks to see if by chance he had a forgotten van Meegeren hidden away, and it would be promoted to the front window, and quickly sold, at treble its previous price. Sales of reproductions rocketed. But all proceeds normally due to the artist go at once into the bankruptcy; there is a deficit of some \$2,400,000, and there can never be any doubt that, whoever receives any money, it will never be the van Meegerens.

The question remains: was he a great man? None will agree upon the ingredients of greatness, upon whether van Meegeren's paintings were great works of art; reasons will always be put forward to explain everything, if it is desired to invalidate his artistic claims. Yet every man's ambition should be to become as accomplished as he can in the trade or vocation which he has chosen, and the achievement of this position is perhaps more important than the trade. Consciously and deliberately, van Meegeren set out towards an end; he reached it, and in doing so became the greatest of his kind. It is an especial and surprising genius; it required a particular and unique combination of talents; he achieved something never achieved before, something, I believe, which will never be achieved again. Thus already he has acquired notoriety; thus also he has qualified for fame.

The book is in two Parts; in the first, the story is taken to the autumn day in 1932 when Han van Meegeren, then 43, began his experiments in the art of forgery. Part Two continues to his trial and death. Causes are as interesting as effects; and it is from the first part of van Meegeren's life that the second may perhaps be foreseen.

Oxford, 1950.

Part One: 1889-1932

Chapter I

HE WAS a delicate child, small for his age and aware of his smallness, ever since his father first called him "*Little Henri*." Till then, he hadn't noticed it; it hadn't seemed to be something important, for he had made many friends among the children of Deventer, and they had always played together. It had made no difference that he could never run quite so fast, or jump so high, because anyway they thought he was a good fellow and he always took part in their expeditions and adventures. One day he knew that he would never be as strong as they were. "Little Henri has a weak heart"—that was what his father had said; he had heard it quite clearly. And he had run to his mother in tears that evening.

"Does it mean that I will die soon?" he asked her.

Henri was born in Deventer in 1889, on the river Ijssel in the Dutch province of Overijssel. His father, Henricus, was a schoolmaster, who taught at the *Kweek* school in the center of the town, where he instructed

those young men who had themselves chosen teaching as a career. He had degrees in English and Mathematics and had written a General History, but his reputation was more for his strictly ordered life, and for the degree of discipline which he instilled in his family and his pupils, than for academic distinction.

"Holidays?" the children of Deventer would whisper. "The schoolmaster's children never *have* any holidays. They say their father is even stricter at home than he is at school; for them, the term goes on the whole year round!"

And at home the schoolmaster was no less than this reputation. He ensured as well as he could that his children should grow up worthy of their father. They were forbidden to speak unless he had first addressed them, and the few treats he allowed them were unoriginal and standardized. Herman and Henri had birthdays within a week (Herman was a year older), and their father decided early in their lives that they should both receive an identical present. Herman's came first, so that Henri knew always a week beforehand exactly what he would receive that year. Every Sunday, the family proceeded to church in a neat crocodile, headed by father. On these occasions, the fair curls of Herman and the dark curls of Henri caused much attention and admiration among the interested and respectful inhabitants of Deventer.

Henri's mother, Augusta, was delicate and sensitive like her son. She was fifteen years younger than her husband and was to bear him five children over a period of thirteen years. There was a close understanding between

Henri and his mother. He was her third child, her second son. That early evening when he had run to her safe arms she tried to comfort him; but even his mother was unable to remove the impression he had gained of his own weakness.

Each morning afterwards, before his brother and sisters were about, Henri would regard his reflection in the bedroom mirror. Each time, his naked body would seem to shrink as he beheld it. His shoulders were hunched and narrow, his legs spindly; Herman had been inches taller this time last year! Henri became obsessed with the idea that he would never grow, that he would never be able to return the taunts which he now saw concealed in so many of his fellows' comments. In his own idea, the world belonged only to the strong: "It is not good to live," he thought, "if one has not strength and power."

These secret thoughts he confided to no one. He withdrew more and more to a world of his own, and came more and more to prefer his own company. He wandered off for walks by himself, where he could dream without interruption of the greatness he desired. The schoolmaster was disappointed with his dreamy son, but in affairs such as these he had definite Ideas. He believed that there is work that must be accomplished, and that if this has been done then the rest of the time is free; that with this provision there should be no dictation as to the manner in which the spare time of his children should be spent. His son displeased him, but he was making good progress at school; and so long as this was the case Henricus had no complaints.

"Little Henri has little to say for himself," he would comment to Augusta. "Perhaps he will learn to speak when he reaches High School."

At the age of ten, Henri began to draw. At first they were schoolboy drawings of his father and his masters; caricatures, libels, grotesque designs, which began to decorate the margins of his homework. Then he discovered that these no longer satisfied: he drew trees and animals and clouds. It became his delight; he made pictures of his dreams. He invented a world where he was strong and his subjects were lions. Soon he spent all his pocket money on pencils and crayons. His notebooks became filled with sketches of anything which was going on around him. And from time to time he sought help from his mother, who had once been artistically inclined, until her marriage put an end to it.

At first, his father paid no attention to the strange new craze which his son had discovered. He would have preferred that he should have distinguished himself in the schoolroom, but he stuck to his opinion that his children could do what they liked out of school, provided it never interfered with their academic progress. Soon, however, it became clear that in this respect Henri was no longer giving satisfaction. He was spending more and more time with his new-found love, through which he could express his dreams. His homework was suffering, his concentration in class wandering from the words of his teacher to his latest drawings at the back of his notebook. His father decided that the time had come when

40]

an example must be made, and Henri was summoned to his study.

"I will never interfere with your hobbies and pastimes, so long as they do not interfere with your work," his father told him. "But now you are allowing this passion for drawing to get the better of you; and you must learn that work must always come first. Give me the drawings which you made this evening."

Henri pulled them in silence from his pocket. Before him, his father tore them into a hundred pieces. "I will do the same," he promised, "whenever I learn that your work has been neglected. See that it never happens again."

Thus he stimulated in his son a new desire to create, and to replace those pictures which his father had destroyed.

As Henri approached the age of twelve, when he should move to High School, he found almost with surprise that he was becoming a ringleader in practical jokes against elder boys and those in authority. It began with the police. No one was afraid of the police in Deventer, who were regarded with a feeling of enmity quite unknown in any English village. One day Henri decided that it would be fun to incarcerate the police force in their Station. He slammed the door, locked it, and threw the key into the canal. Henri was so small that nobody suspected him, and it was fun to watch the angry police climbing with indignity through the windows. Then they had to break the door down, as there was no duplicate key. Henri became a hero when it was

discovered that he was the author of this exploit. Its success pleased him immensely and other tricks followed. How they laughed when he and Herman stole the communion wine from their uncle, a priest in the next parish! Henri discovered that there was always a laugh to be had, and kudos to be gained, at the expense of a master or of a stronger fellow. And they helped to make up for his lack of prowess in the boxing ring and in the football field.

If a slight digression may be allowed; it may be noticed in the Chamber of Horrors in Madame Tussaud's waxwork exhibition, that murderers as a whole are of small stature, and two who attempted to assassinate English sovereigns stand little more than sixty inches high. Thus, it may perhaps be deduced, they were marked out early as potential regicides. Can it have been for the same reason, his small size emphasized by an oppressing father, that Henri van Meegeren first entered the Faculty of Practical Jokers—from which he was to graduate with first class honors, and, indeed, to become Professor and King? Was the stage set in his early childhood for his later activities?

To these suggestions his father's reply would doubtless have been: *Post hoc ergo propter hoc!* with a contemptuous shrug. For he was a man of learning and used every opportunity to introduce fragments from the classics or French phrases into his ordinary conversation—especially when the company present, which sometimes, unfortunately, included himself, was not quite certain of the precise meaning of the words.

It was from a master at his school in Deventer, Bartus Korteling, that Henri received his first lessons in drawing and painting when he was twelve years old. Korteling's son, Wim, was of the same age as Henri, and a close friend; they had discovered that drawing interested them both, and met when they had the chance to compare their schoolboy methods. "My father is a real artist," Wim had told him; "That is the way he earns his living, not by reading out of silly old books, but by painting pictures and selling them. People pay him for his paintings—real money to buy things with. Just imagine! He gets paid for doing something he really *likes*—likes better than anything else in the world, he says." Henri listened in awe. It sounded the most delightful prospect. If only he were less shy—he longed to meet this man.

Korteling was to remain a close friend to Henri for the rest of his life. Though little known as an artist, he had a depth of knowledge of the history of art and of artistic methods, and gave Henri that early training in care and in meticulous brush-work which was invaluable to him later. He learned with interest from his son of Henri's passion, and invited him one evening to his studio. Afterwards, whenever there was a chance, Henri ran eagerly through the town to his new-found friend. He loved to watch him at work and to listen eagerly to explanations and advice which were freely given. If Korteling never grew tired of teaching, then his pupil certainly never tired of listening to him; the exercises

which he gave him were assiduously carried out and Korteling regarded his progress with interest.

At the age of twelve Henri went to High School, where he was not discouraged by his small size from participating in the frequent fights between the High School and their rivals, the Commercial School; he wished to show his fellows that he was as good a man as they. Once, fighting in the front rank, he was struck on the forehead by a well-aimed lump of coal from an opponent's catapult. Bleeding profusely, he fell to the ground. The scar he carried to his grave; in those days it was his greatest pride.

But Henri learned better as he grew older. He began to understand that power and riches do not follow only as the result of physical strength. He no longer feared that his smallness would prevent him from the achievement of success. In the first place, as he grew older, his health improved. His shoulders became broader, his frame stronger. More important, he realized that other gifts were more necessary to power than sinew and bone. He learned to despise the hefty athlete who could run a race but was clumsy with his hands. He began to read profusely and to attend carefully to his studies. Thus, he realized, he would attain to the position that he desired. He absorbed all the books he could find. He submitted to special evening instruction from his father. He discovered a bent for mathematics. He learned poetry easily at the second reading.

None of this new-found zeal, however, distracted his mind from the one branch of his activities of which his

father still knew little. His meetings with Korteling continued and the old artist was delighted with his work. In the High School drawing class, Henricus was little surprised to learn that his erratic son was the star pupil. "A natural accomplishment for an intelligent boy," he would say to his friends. "Nothing more to it than that. And besides, it may be of value to him later on, in a sort of way. It is my intention that he should attend at Delft University and become an architect—if he continues to make satisfactory progress here."

His father's hopes were justified. By the age of sixteen, his son had reached the top class. Delft could not accept him for almost a year. Henri was again summoned to his father's study.

"I am pleased to say that I consider your progress satisfactory," his father told him. "You have reached the top class and I do not propose that you should stay at the High School. It is possible that you would benefit from the University of Delft, but you cannot be accepted there for another year. It is possible that if you worked hard enough at home during these coming months, and passed the entrance examinations, then you would take your degree and become an architect. But I do not know if you can be trusted to concentrate on your books during these months ahead, or when you are at Delft, on your own for the first time in your life."

Henri shifted uneasily from foot to foot. He was never quite sure how an interview with his father would end. He desired nothing more than to be at Delft—to be "on his own," free from parental hold. He

was prepared to work any hours to pass the entrance examination. When he reached Delft, it might perhaps be different; perhaps there *would* be distractions of a kind; but by then he would be free and nothing would matter. His father had guessed that his thoughts would be running along these lines.

"I have therefore decided," he went on, "to leave the matter in your own hands. Whether you go to Delft will depend on your work in the coming year. I do not feel, however, that you will be found lacking in this respect. But I have decided to allow you at Delft (assuming you are successful in securing entrance) *five* years only, instead of the usual six; and if you go to Delft I will expect you to graduate. Well, my son, are we to strike a bargain?"

Henri would have agreed to anything, though he knew it would be difficult to become an architect in the shorter period. It was arranged accordingly; Henri left the High School, and began a year's "cramming" at home for the entrance examinations to the University.

His spare moments he spent with Korteling. Korteling was a painter of the Old School, who disliked and despised the modern style. He believed that his contemporaries were ignorant of their profession, and that their knowledge of technique and of the history of art was superficial. Henri van Meegeren began his study of Vermeer at the age of sixteen, when he was held up to him as a model by his friend.

"How much do you know about the paints you use?" Korteling would ask him. "You buy them in neat little

tubes at the shop on the corner, but have you any idea how they are made? Was Vermeer content with a tube of blue paint made by a chemist? He could only achieve the brightness and depth he was seeking if he discovered his own methods. For his blues, he bought lapis-lazuli, ground the stone to powder, mixed it with oil in his own studio, experimented till he had the precise shade and texture that he desired. Never waste your time with today's scribblers; study the Masters, the men of old who had depth as well as breadth. Study their compositions and their paintwork. Miss no details."

The boy was beginning to realize how much was to be learned, and in how little time. He followed the instructions of his friend. Each week he brought a new batch of drawings and invited criticism which was readily given. "Here, look at this hand you have drawn," Korteling would say. "A hand doesn't look like that, you know. It is an impression you have gained in a minute. If you had studied it for a little longer you would have seen that the object of your composition was something altogether different. More than half the time you spend on a picture, you must spend in careful study of your model. The impression we receive of objects is superficial. We remember their shapes, we recognize them a second time. But we cannot paint them. Here, this is my attempt at your subject; I have studied the expression of the human hand for the greater part of my life, and I'm still not at all sure how it goes."

Henri learned his lesson well. He spent his spare hours examining the work of the sixteenth and seven-

teenth century painters, reading about the way in which they worked, about their style and their technique. This early study which he gave to the Masters was to form the solid foundation on which his future work was to be based.

It was also to come in useful in the last years of his life.

His year between High School and his entrance to the University went quickly in his double life of painting and study. He passed his examinations with flying colors. In 1907 he left Deventer to begin his architectural studies at Delft. It was the greatest single change in his life. Delft, birthplace of Vermeer, is close to the Hague. Here Henri had rooms of his own; he was completely independent, free for the first time from every parental control. At once he experienced that feeling of freedom which every young man knows who arrives at the University after a cloistered life at home. Here was no stern parent to inquire into his doings! He could keep what hours he wished. Here there were no restrictions on smoking or drinking, or on the company he kept. And, more than anything, here he could paint—openly and without restraint. Henri—whose name was soon shortened to the nickname of “Han”—revelled in his new-found liberty.

Yet the financial bargain he had made with his father kept him, at first, hard at his work. He was to become an architect. Very well, then, he would become a successful architect. Full of good intentions, he turned his mind to his blueprints. At first the work went well

and he pleased his tutors. But more and more, he found that his pencil was straying from his work. Why is the head of a goat drawn on the back of these plans for a new dwelling house? What place has a human foot at the bottom of a blueprint for a factory? Han found almost reluctantly that his notebooks were only half occupied with academic material. The other half was filled with carefully executed sketches for his next picture, or with portraits or caricatures of his neighbors, made whilst he was in the lecture room.

Han, however, did not allow this to worry him unduly. He regarded the University as it should be regarded: as a place where all the latent talents may be discovered, as a place where only fools imagine that the be-all and end-all lie in high academic distinction. Does a man reap the highest good who gains a first-class degree, but takes no part in the hundred other undergraduate activities, and never gives way to the urgent impulses of a creative or hedonistic heart? Are the lectures and the essays, the classes and the tutorials, the diplomas and the degrees, the only things that are of any account? Does a man not discover, outside the examination schools, the true bent of his own heart, the true desires of his own life, the unexpected talents which have been hidden hitherto, and enough friends to last him a lifetime?

Han threw himself passionately into the new life. He became a popular figure among the students. He joined the rowing club and began to win prizes. He made many friends. He painted feverishly and worked at his blue-

prints. And late into the nights, in an atmosphere filled with cigar smoke, he would sit with his beer and his new-found friends, discussing those subjects which have been discussed into the small hours by students of every country and of every age; and Han and his friends, between them, solved all the problems of mankind, just as every other student had done before him.

By the last years of his life, by which he is best known and by which he is most judged, Han van Meegeren had acquired a reputation for riotous living and for excesses of every kind which colors all his life. It was more or less accepted that he did little work, that he was a waster even though a delightful one, who had made his fortune and was no longer capable of serious and prolonged work. It was very far from always thus. With Han, success went to the head. Later in life he was to earn a good living honestly: by paintings, that is to say, which went under his own name and were sold without delusion; but as he earned more, so his desires increased, and so increased the speed at which he grew accustomed to live. During these years between his arrival at Delft and his first divorce in 1923 he was always poor. While he was poor he worked well. He had always many friends, and always enjoyed life. But need kept him hard at work. On his arrival at Delft he began to deepen immensely. At once his interests became wider, his knowledge more detailed, his beliefs more liberal. He was fascinated by knowledge, by the new people and emotions he was experiencing each day. He never had time to stop and take stock of his position. He had no

50]

girl friends. He had left Deventer with a deal of book knowledge and very little else. His cloistered home life had done everything for him, and there was more to be learned about himself than outside himself. He was interested in only one thing: in learning as much as he could about art whilst at the same time justifying his presence by a minimum attention to his architectural studies. "After all," he could reassure himself, "Art and Architecture will help each other; by my studies of art I am helping myself, quite apart from the satisfaction it brings me at the present time." It was a Han far deeper and a Han far more mature who returned home to Deventer after his first year.

And at Deventer a strange event had taken place the day before he arrived there. His brother Herman had arrived there—unexpectedly. He had, in fact, run away. The two brothers had always been the closest friends, though there was a remarkable contrast between them. Herman had taken after his father: he was serious, regular in his habits, attentive to his official studies. Henri had taken after no one; he inherited his genius from himself. Life for him was opening out on every side, while for Herman it was contracting still further, narrow though it had always been. Herman had decided to become a priest. In this, of course, he had the full approval of his father and every support that was necessary.

Now, two years later, the full reaction had set in. Herman was miserable at his seminary. So he ran away. Three days later, dishevelled and torn, he turned up at Deventer. "I cannot go back," he told his father. "It is

horrible, I do not want to be a priest." The argument had begun. In the middle of it, Han arrived from Delft. "Of course you cannot return," his brother told him. "Come back with me to Delft, it's wonderful." The argument continued. Then the bishop arrived in person. "In forty years I have known nothing like it. The boy must come back with me. Of course he is happy. How could he be anything else? I will say no more if he returns with me tonight."

The two brothers had a few minutes together. With envy Herman heard of the ungraduate life of freedom, and compared it with his own restrictions and his own loneliness. He pleaded with his father in vain. "It was your own wish, and you are to stick to it," his father told him. "I cannot have you wasting all your life, deciding each year you wish to take up a new profession. The eighteen months you have already spent would be wasted. Let me hear no more about it."

Suitably chastised, Herman, with all the sympathy of Han, returned to his cell, and Han, some weeks later, to his freedom.

But was it freedom? During his second year, Han thought over and over again of his meeting with his brother. "They are turning him into a priest," he thought to himself. "He doesn't want to be a priest. He probably won't even make a good priest. But soon it will be too late for him to change—if it isn't too late already. We act from habit. We set out, at my age, for any of a hundred irrelevant reasons on some course or another—Herman to become a priest, I to become an archi-

tect. Once we have started, we go on from habit, even if we find our real desire leading in an opposite direction. The doctor, for example: he decides at the age of seventeen that that is the profession he desires to follow for the rest of his life. What does he know at the age of seventeen of his talents, of his bents, of the way in which his character will develop during the next five years of training? What, indeed, does he really know of the medical profession and of the work involved? And half way through it, perhaps, when he is twenty and his mind has had time to develop a little, he realizes he is all wrong, that he enjoys writing articles and criticisms for the College magazines, that he would far rather spend the rest of his life, perhaps, as an author; but he does nothing about it; from habit he goes on with being a doctor, and before he knows where he is, he has *become* a doctor. And then it's too late to do anything. His professional life has started. He is working all the time with his patients, building up a practice, attending at the hospital. He believes that one day he will find time to write the romantic novel or the sonnets he feels he has inside him. They never get any further. Then he is old, and then he dies. Henri van Meegeren, do you honestly and truthfully *want* to become an architect?"

Whenever Han reached this point in the process of self-interrogation to which he subjected himself, there was always the same emphatic answer. He realized it without difficulty. He wanted to become an artist. He didn't want to become an architect. The wax of his life, still molten, was beginning to harden—to the wrong

shape. Had he the courage, or the independence, to remelt it over the fire of his desires? To allow it to harden in the artistic mold of his choice?

Had it not been for the childhood which he had experienced. Han's difficulties in this matter would have been easier to solve. As a child, he had felt that his small size would prevent him from achieving greatness—and greatness he desired to achieve. This feeling had been replaced by more adult considerations: had he the artistic talent to support himself—and perhaps a family—solely by his brush? He had learned about painting, and he enjoyed nothing more; in it, he found the true realization of himself; but, when it came to a question of hard fact, would he be able to earn his daily bread? "I can always earn enough to keep myself if I become an architect," he would think. "That is a straightforward, easy matter which need not worry me. But if I leave Delft with nothing but an empty canvas and a box of paints . . . what will become of me? Suppose I started to paint, and it just happened that no one bought my pictures? I could expect no help from my family. And I would never be able to admit my mistake, as Herman has done. There would be no turning back. I could never go home to Father and say 'You were right, I am not an artist, I cannot earn my living in that way, and please, Father, is there a job for me in Deventer?' It would be a decision once and for all, and when it was made there could be no change of heart."

Between these two feelings, certainty that he was meant to become a painter by his natural talent and in-

clinations, and doubt about the sufficiency of this talent, Han could not decide. Something was needed to sway the balance—something external; perhaps the advice or encouragement of someone he admired, or respected. Or, of course, of someone he loved.

But with girls, Han van Meegeren was far from at ease. He imagined that no girl would look at a weakling, a sensitive fellow who spent his spare time painting and discussing philosophy, while others were excelling at sports or in the gymnasium. Surely no girl would take an interest in *him*? They all ran after those hefty, athletic fellows!

One evening in the summer of 1911, Han was sitting disconsolately at the Delft rowing club. His attention was occupied by a little brown girl lying by the river side with a group of friends. As was his manner when he saw a form or a figure which interested him, he began to sketch her lithe sunburnt body on a scrap of paper. She did not see what he was doing. He was gazing at her intently when one of her companions, looking around, saw him and called him over with a laugh.

"Here, Han, meet An," he said. It was to become a sort of catchword. Han and An. It got them off on the right foot right from the start. Or, at any rate, it was a help. For An was almost as shy as he was.

"Delighted to meet you," he said. And "Hell," he thought, "this is my chance: here is the sweetest little girl I've ever met, and now I'm gauche and tongue-tied like a schoolboy when I should be sparkling with wit and conversation." He hardly heard what the other was

saying. "This is Anna de Voogt *—staying in the Hague. You should find something to talk about, you two; for An studies architecture as part of her course in the history of art. Here, Han, you're excessively dreamy today! What's the matter with you?"

"Oh . . . architecture . . . oh, yes," said Han. "Yes, of course, that's interesting, we must talk about that subject one day together, Miss de Voogt; I'm studying it myself, you know, here in the University. Why haven't we met before? When will we meet again?"

Somehow the ice had been broken, to the high amusement of the others, to whom the shyness of both Anna and Han was proverbial. "A strange couple those two would make, all right," they thought as they saw them together again next day. "Each would spend the rest of eternity waiting for the other to speak first." But as a matter of fact, they found a great deal to talk about.

The first question which Han asked himself after their first meeting was, of course, whether he would dare to show her his paintings. "After all," he thought, "she's an art student and probably a good one; she is sure to know a great deal about artistic technicalities and she won't think much of my efforts, which are only spare time work, after all. Still, what a help it would be, if I

* Pr. Vot, Anna's father, was a Dutchman, her mother an East Indian, a Mohammedan from Sumatra; there the Sultan had opposed their marriage because the husband was European. When Anna was still very young the native leaders had their way: the marriage was dissolved and Anna's mother married the Sultan's son. Her father stayed in Java, and she came to Holland with her Dutch grandmother, with whom she lived in the Hague.

could just bring myself to do it, to have the opinion of someone outside—to hear if she *really* thought they were any good—whether she believed I had a chance of making good if I became an artist instead of an architect. Anyway, it would give us something to talk about; I can think of so much to say, now we're apart, but when we're together, it all seems to go, somehow. I must look for an opportunity."

The opportunity came quickly—and Han shyly showed her some of his pictures. "But why are you wasting your time, learning to be an architect?" she asked at once. "You should be studying in the art school; talent like this isn't to be wasted." "I've never known if it were 'talent,'" said Han. "No one has ever seen it before, except my friend Korteling. Do you really think I could make a living as an artist? And, oh dear, what would my family think?"

But "Bother what your family think!" said Anna. "Of course you can make a living by your brush. I'll help you; I know people who would help. You've just got to make up your mind to do it, and of course you can succeed."

Han was not so easily persuaded. There was a lifetime of doubt to overcome. But Anna and he met more and more frequently; and more and more they discussed the future in terms of his becoming an artist. "But first I must take my finals at Delft," said Han in that winter of 1911. "I have another year to go and it would be a pity to waste all the time I have spent here." An agreed. All their time they spent together and soon they dis-

covered that they were in love. At first they thought they would wait before getting married till Han had finished with Delft; but then they decided that they could wait no longer and at the start of 1912 Han went home to Deventer to break the news to his parents. He encountered less opposition than he had expected; principally because his father took a liking to Anna, and objections were only on the grounds of religion. "Of course you're a fool to imagine you can get married," he told Han. "Let alone support a family which I suppose will be starting soon. But I see that you are determined and there is little I can say, except that I insist that your Anna should become a Catholic."

To this proposition Anna readily agreed. She had never had any very definite religion, and, in her opinion, her love for Han was more important anyway. She began to take instruction and was soon safely in the arms of Rome.

The two lovers were married in the Hague, in the spring of 1912. It was a quiet wedding, to which only their most intimate friends were invited. In the little town of Rijswijk, they set up house together and Han went to work each day in Delft. They were very poor, but also they were very much in love.

Chapter II

RIJSWIJK, five miles from the Hague and now a suburb, was then a pleasant country town. Here Han and Anna had the run of the house owned by Anna's grandmother, who kept herself to herself and did not interfere with the lives of the young couple. Han went in to the Hague each morning for his work at the University and returned in the evenings to his paintings. He led a full and interesting life. He believed that he was sure to make a success of his chosen career, but first he was determined to pass his final examinations at Delft, which were due in December. This, he knew, was desired by his father, who would not easily forgive him if he abandoned a project before it were completed.

But he found life difficult. Domestic distractions were not the only trouble. He was intent upon selling some pictures and making a name for himself before the supply of money from his father ran out at the end of the year. As a result, he spent less time than he should have spent upon his work for Schools. Besides, in the artistic

world, he was achieving less success than he he had at first expected. Carried away by his wife's enthusiasm, he had been confident that he would have no difficulty in selling his own pictures, which would supplement his allowance. He believed the time would come when he would be able to live entirely for himself; when he would spend each delightful day in working on his own creations which he would sell for high prices and which would keep him and his family in comfort. For a little while, as he made his reputation, he would have other work as well, but in the evenings and on his days off he would paint his own pictures and so lay the foundations for his career.

But he was totally unknown. He was a beginner without experience. Nobody commissioned his portraits. Nobody would buy his pictures. After three months he persuaded a College friend to pay fifteen shillings for a study of the University. It was his first reward as a professional artist. From then on, he sold occasional pictures to his friends at Delft, who showed an unusual but gratifying appreciation of his work. Han, however, was not deceived. He painted for many hours each week. There was little reward for his work. He had reached one more of those critical moments which every creative artist experiences.

First, there is the time when the decision has to be made; when the passion must be strong enough to overthrow a safe, orthodox career and to take upon oneself the reckless life of painter, writer, or musician. That is one half of the battle. Then there follow the lean years.

There follow the long labors and the small rewards. Until there comes the time when another decision must be made: whether the hire is worthy of the laborer; whether anyone will ever appreciate the work on which so much pains and inspiration have been spent. Instead of the easy praise to which the young artist has become accustomed at school, there is the competition of the world. It was simple to win prizes, gold stars and the applause of teachers and friends, for the still life or the self-portrait which had occupied a half-holiday afternoon. Now, no one is interested in the pictures wrought in the evenings when the day's work has been completed. The requests to paint portraits are politely refused. Editors, critics, art galleries—all alike want a well-known name, somebody who is already a somebody. At this moment in an artist's life, more than at any other time, nothing succeeds like success: for *one* picture to be bought or commissioned by a discriminating patron! Then, at once, every effort is forthcoming, and soon, it may be, the second picture is sold.

How easy it is to be discouraged! How easy it is to cut short the artistic career before it has begun! To what end these efforts out-of-school? So felt Han in the autumn of 1913, as the time for his examinations at Delft approached. Appreciation, however small, was the one thing necessary to him if he were to continue with his plans. This is indeed true of any young artist. To one of van Meegeren's character, it was even more essential. Lack of confidence in himself was ever present; doubt of his talent and of his power was a constant fear. There

came at this time the encouragement which he so needed.

Every five years, at the Hague Academy, a competition was held and a gold medal awarded for the best painting or drawing by anyone who had become a student since the last time the competition had been held. Han was eligible and decided upon the subject of his composition. It would be an interior in sepia of the St. Laurens Church at Rotterdam, where his architectural knowledge would be of assistance to him, and he went all out to win the prize. The gold medal was of little importance to him, but to succeed would enhance his reputation and revive his flagging self-confidence.

But for Han everything seemed to be happening at the same time. Canvases for the Academy Prize must be completed by January. His examinations at Delft were in the preceding month. As they approached, his son Jacques was born. Han was preoccupied with looking after Anna and with work for the gold medal, and his University work dwindled. The time came for his examinations, and he failed them. Shortly afterwards he was called to Deventer by his father, to account for the way in which his time and money had been spent.

"You have ignored the advice which I have always given you," his father said. "It was bad enough that you should get married before you had finished at Delft, so that there would be a wife—and now a family!—to distract you from your work. But it is clear that you have given up too much of your time to this unfortunate passion for painting which you have developed, and which

you have allowed to get the better of you. I have always insisted that work should come first—that what my children do in their spare time is their own affair but that they must occupy their working hours profitably and well. Now, you see the result when you disregard my instructions.”

Han was miserable. He was entirely dependent upon his father for money supplies, and knew very well that he would be unable at the present time to support his family as an artist. Moreover he intensely disliked to be dependent upon anyone. He wondered in silence what his father would suggest.

“I told you five years ago,” said Henricus, “that I would pay you an allowance for five years only. A year from now you could take your examinations again. At the present moment you are unqualified for work of any kind. I have therefore decided to give you one more chance: I will pay you your allowance for one more year—but on the condition that you *repay it to me in full* during the ten years after your graduation. So go back to Delft quickly before I change my mind, and this time stick to your books and disregard the distractions.”

Han returned to Delft. At least he had money for another year, and of course he would pass his examinations. But he remembered his canvas of the St. Laurens Church, now nearing completion, and determined that first he would finish it and submit it for the prize. Then he would get down to the work for Delft, pass his finals, and be free.

Han entered for the gold medal and won. He sold the

picture for three hundred dollars, and was thus well-off for the rest of the year. Later he was to pawn the medal, but the success had its lasting effects. It made it far easier for him to sell other paintings, since patrons knew he had won the Academy prize. It spurred him to continue. Also, it started a train of thought which was to vex him for the rest of his life.

For after selling his prize picture, he began to sell other pictures. "*Why?*" thought Han. "*Why* should I sell more pictures now than I did before? Am I painting *better* now? Of course I'm not. But people have heard that I won the Gold Medal of the Academy, so they are more anxious to buy my work. It is very gratifying; my name is beginning to be known. But does it say much for the appreciation of the buyers? Do they buy pictures because they are pleased by the pictures, or because they have heard of the man who painted them? And the same is true at the galleries: as soon as it is mentioned that a picture is by a certain master—but not before—the spectator is wild in his praises. Ah well, be that as it may, it is a help to *me*; and if it means a bit more pocket money, then why should I complain?" So the problem was dismissed for the time being; but in one form or another it was to recur many times in his life.

In the summer of 1913 Han and his family moved from Rijswijk to Scheveningen, a seaside town on the outskirts of the Hague, where houses were cheaper and where Han was nearer to his work at the University. At the same time he took and passed the first part of his

64]

examinations. But his tutor, Professor Klinkhamer, was dissatisfied with his work. Klinkhamer believed that being an artist and an architect could not go together—that there were two quite separate vocations which could not co-exist. Han held the opposite view: he believed that they were complementary to each other. “You’d better become a painter, for you’ll never be an architect,” was Klinkhamer’s verdict as he looked over Han’s drawings—drawings which should have been prosaic blueprints, yet were blueprints with a difference, with cats and dogs in the foreground and roses in the window boxes.

“Well, then, by God, I *will* become a painter,” thought Han.

December came. The second part of the examinations began, and the students trooped into the Schools; Han van Meegeren was not among them. “What’s the point?” he had asked himself that morning. “If I ‘cut’ the exams, I can’t get a degree, and then I can’t become an architect, so that my future is determined.” In fact, on that day when he should have been at work, he was on his way to Deventer to break the news to his father. In the evening, the fight began.

It was a hard fight, but Henri held the trump card. “It’s too late now, Father,” he said. “You can denounce me, but I cannot go back. I cannot sit the exams, they are already over. I cannot become an architect, and that’s all about it.”

“Not a guilder will you receive from my pocket . . .” his father began; but “No guilder do I expect,” his son

rejoined. "Somehow or other I will earn enough to support myself, *and* to repay the money I owe you for Delft." "Money wasted," grunted his father. "No, not wasted," Henri replied. "I have learned more than ever I expected to learn. I have found independence and I have learned self-confidence. I have learned that honesty to oneself is more important than conforming with any tradition. You tell me that the money has been wasted which I spent at Delft. I would rather waste that, than the rest of my life in a profession which I don't care to follow."

This was a new Han with a determination to which his father was far from accustomed. He saw that his son's mind was made up and that there was no point in arguing further. Somewhere deep down inside him, he felt in any case a pride at his son's resolution and indeed at his success. While he had no strong feelings about art, he had no strong objections to the true artist. He only disliked those impostors who never accomplish anything and whose artistic pretensions (he believed) should be suppressed in childhood. If Han's desires remained after the opposition which he had already displayed, then he felt that there must be something there which was now worth nurturing. And, after all, he had won the gold medal.

Henricus had one last attempt at governing his wayward son. He appealed to Anna. "Tell that husband of yours to sit his examinations again next summer," he asked her. "This time he will succeed, and I will foot the bill." But An was as resolute as Han. She would give

no assistance, and Henricus relinquished the uneven struggle.

In the years which followed, Han would go once a year with Anna and the children to spend a week or so of the summer with his father and mother at Deventer. These visits remained something of an ordeal for Han. His father never really forgave him for his failure at Delft. The position was made easier by the fact that Henricus had a liking for Anna, and both he and Augusta were delighted by their grandchildren. But Han and Henricus were never on good terms, and later it was natural that his father should disapprove violently of Han's divorce, after which he saw little of his son. Soon after Han's second marriage, which, as a Roman Catholic, he refused to recognize, he died, in 1933.

During the year after he left the University, Han and his family were supported by An's grandmother, who moved out of the house at Scheveningen so that they would be on their own there. Han had made many new friends and his pictures were reasonably successful. But he knew that he would achieve greater success through his increased prestige if he had a degree in art at the Hague Academy, though till then he had never had the time or the money to attend the classes. Now he decided that his own knowledge and skill might have reached the required standard without additional work. The examinations took place in August 1914; they consisted of two parts, practical and theoretical, and for a month beforehand Han did a little homework on the history of art and upon the other theoretical subjects. When

the time came for the written examinations, his school-boy studies stood him in good stead, and he had no difficulty in passing. He also passed the first part of the practical side, though he was classed as "unsatisfactory" in the field of portraiture.

For the second part of the practical side, candidates were required to paint a still life in the course of a morning. All were ushered into a large room where they sat in a semi-circle, Han in the center. In front of them was their subject; it was to Han's liking: an antique chair, a seventeenth century vase, candlesticks. Behind the model sat the professors at a green baize table. Han began to paint. He glanced from the chair to the vase, from the vase to the green baize table, from the table to the professors. He remembered his "unsatisfactory" for portraiture. He resented it. "I'll teach them a lesson," he thought to himself. "I'll paint, not only the still life, but the green baize table, and all the professors as they sit there regarding their victims." He got to work on his idea, and by the end of the morning it was finished. There on the canvas was the entire scene before him, and a perfect likeness of each of the professors.

Next day, Han was awarded his degree, and his picture was on exhibition in the Academy. That same day, England declared war on Germany. Han was twenty-five years old.

Chapter III

HAN'S MARRIAGE to Anna broke up during the 1914-18 war.

Although Holland was never a combatant nation, things at home became at once more difficult. Bread was rationed, it was hard to find milk for the children, the black market flourished, there were economic restrictions of every kind. But always the greatest fear remained: would Holland herself enter the war, today, next month, next year? One by one, Han's friends were called to the colors. He himself was rejected on medical grounds. His friend Quartero went off to the Army; then Quartero's wife followed him as a doctor; Han became depressed, restless, lonely; he badly needed a change, and new friends to take the place of those that had left him. He was working hard but did not sell as many pictures as he would have liked; and he was worried at home by domestic responsibilities which he regarded as a hindrance to his work. He loved his son but was careless about his upbringing; and the noise of the

small child in a small house worried his nerves. He had no desire to join the Army, was terrified at the prospect of taking part in any fighting, yet felt the usual unexpected pangs at being left behind, a civilian, when all his friends had gone, if not to the front line, then at least to the Army or to work connected with the war. Seeking to justify himself and his actions, he became defensive, short-tempered and irritable, and began to have scenes with Anna. He was, in fact, becoming caught up, dragged down, tormented by the war just as everyone, combatant or non-combatant, finds himself tormented in the end. Everything that went wrong in the family was blamed automatically upon Anna. Han took to spending much of his time away from the house drinking with friends, and became excessively moody and depressed.

After taking his degree in art, Han was offered a position as professor at the Hague Academy of Art. He had been flattered by the offer, and sorely tempted to accept it, since it would have given him social position as well as financial stability, and would have justified in his father's eyes his decision to follow an artistic career. But he knew that it would leave him little time for his own work; that he would be teaching other people all day long and would never have time for himself. Shortly afterwards, the young man who had worked as assistant to Professor Gips, teacher of art at Delft University, was mobilized, and Gips, who was a friend and admirer of Han, asked him if he would like to fill his place. This was work which was nearer Han's heart since it would

only occupy a few hours each week and would take him back to Delft among his many friends. He accepted it on a temporary basis.

In this way Han at least had a regular income, though a small one. He supplemented it when he sold a picture from time to time. Occasionally he submitted his work for public exhibition, but without success. At last, in 1915, a painting was exhibited in the Hague, and Han's self-confidence was restored. The picture was much admired and as a result he was approached by an art dealer, van der Wilk, who asked him to paint four pictures for him a month under a regular contract for a monthly salary of less than twenty dollars. To this proposal Han readily agreed; he believed that it was a ridiculous reward for his labors but he was badly in need of money, and this would almost double his salary if he continued in his employment at Delft. "I am halfway to freedom," he assured himself. "In a year's time I will be able to give up my work as an assistant and to spend the rest of my life working only for myself. I am going to be great. I am going to succeed."

During the school holidays, Bartus Korteling came often to stay with Han in Scheveningen or the Hague. He was delighted with the progress of his pupil, and continued his instruction with criticism and encouragement. He began to tell Han in detail of the way in which the Old Masters had made their paints—a subject in which he was expert and which interested Han deeply. Together the old man and his young friend pored over ancient recipes and mixed together the

paints of the artists of whose work Han was later to produce counterfeits. It was probably through Korteling that his particular interest in this fascinating subject was awoken. Afterwards, he was seldom content, even for those paintings which passed under his own name, to use synthetic paints bought in a tube. When, many years later, he set out to paint Vermeers, he already had at his disposal a great deal of the necessary knowledge.

But despite his professional successes and the degree to which he was absorbed by artistic studies, the domestic situation was in no way eased. Anna told him that another baby was on the way and the news had two very opposite effects upon Han. One was the increased sympathy which he could not but feel for the woman who was bearing his child. The other was a resentment that there should be another tie; another child to feed (it was hard enough already, he thought to himself); another child screaming in the living room when he was trying to paint in the studio next door. It is hard to say which of these reactions to the news was the stronger. The conflict between them, in any case, exaggerated his depression and the unsatisfactory nature of his life. He painted less, and found it more and more easy to sit with a bottle of wine doing nothing in particular. His knowledge that thus he was wasting his time and misusing his talent was always present, but in a strange way only underlined the difficulty he had in making progress with his work. He told Anna outright that there were to be no more children after this one. Meantime, doctors were

anxious about her health; but Han was told little about this.

In March, 1915, her daughter was born, almost at the cost of her life. Summoned before the doctors, Han was given this news in a way which impressed its seriousness upon him, and was told that any further increase in the family was out of the question anyway for medical reasons, quite apart from financial considerations. This news came as a great shock to Han who had come to look upon his wife as something of a hypochondriac. For a time he stayed at home, and they were happy together again. Then he began once more to feel restless and to long for new adventures.

He wanted to be free. That was what he at last admitted to himself. Marriage—oh, yes, that had been all very well when it had been a romantic association with a pretty young girl, when it had been nothing but love-making and delightful expeditions into the country together, when they had been alone at home with only the responsibility of each other . . . And then he thought back to his times at Delft, and decided that *that* had been even better; *that* had been the only time of real freedom, when he was tied to no one, free from his father and free from a family . . . *Then* if he wanted to go out for an evening by himself, or to take a weekend alone in the country, or with friends, there had been nothing in the world to stop him. And he had been able to work to his heart's content in the privacy and silence of his own room. Like so many others, Han had sought to escape in marriage from his family; and, like

so many others, he had only succeeded in forging new chains.

When a man comes to feel in this way, his first impulse is to break the chains, and in so doing he may forge for himself stronger ones, which fetter him for the rest of his life. Han spent little time at home. "I can do no work there," were the words with which he would justify himself, and only in his inner heart did he admit that he could do no work anywhere. He sought new friends in the Hague, spent the day going from one meeting place to another, and was never able to get down to solid and effective work. He would start a new canvas, work on it for an hour, and then would begin to feel restless. He must get out of the house; he must walk the streets of the Hague alone; he must go for a drink in the restaurant on the corner, where perhaps he would meet some of his latest acquaintances. Anything, he would sometimes feel, to get away; to get away from these four walls which hedge and hem him in, where Anna sits all day looking so pathetic, and where the children cry from morning until nightfall! Anything to get away!

The financial position became impossible. It was a natural part of Han's temperament that he could not end a day with any money left in his pocket. By nature, he was always in debt. Bills came in which were put on one side and forgotten. He and his family lived in poverty. Then he would sell a picture. A fraction of his debt might then be paid, and something would go to Anna for housekeeping—far too little to be any good to

74']

her. The rest went into Han's pocket, and once he had left the house to meet his friends, Anna knew perfectly well that when he returned in the small hours of the next morning, not a penny of it would be left. His debts mounted. From time to time, he would bring off a substantial loan from one of his old friends at Delft or at the Academy. Things would be easier for a while, since Anna insisted that if a loan were accepted it should go towards bills and running the house. Then Han would forget that the money had been lent, would show little gratitude for the generosity of his friends, would become impatient and irritated if they asked him when or whether they could expect to be repaid. From time to time, Anna would connive in an "offensive" on one of her well-off relations to see if by hook or crook an advance could be obtained. Each time a clean breast was made; each time it was said, "We are in debt so many hundreds of guilders; lend us the money and we can begin again with a clean sheet. Once this burden of debts has been paid we can support ourselves and repay the money." One by one these sources dried up. Even Anna's relatives got tired of the endless excuses, and of the assurances repeated over and over again that this would be the last time.

In the summer of 1916, Han decided that the time had come when he should hold his first exhibition. Thus, he hoped, more attention would be directed towards his work, and, perhaps, the interest of the critics aroused. Han knew that Anna would be of the greatest help to him in arranging it and in ensuring its success.

He told her of his plans and all their energy went towards its preparation. Anna had rich relatives whom she would invite. And would they bring their friends? she asked them. And their friends' friends? For Anna knew that if her relatives were prepared to help her on this occasion, they had connections in the artistic world who could put Han on his feet.

Meantime, Han painted in every spare moment to provide enough pictures to fill the hall. His work at the time was remarkable for its versatility: he had no set style, no set medium, no favorite subject. He painted in water colors and in oils; he drew in pencil, pen and ink, and charcoal; little sketches and large canvases. Beach scenes were common, so were interiors; he loved also to paint domestic scenes of his wife and of his son, in every probable and improbable position. His wife in her boudoir; the cat stealing the milk; his baby being lulled to sleep: with cathedral interiors and paintings of bathers on the Scheveningen beach, these were among the subjects which were included in his exhibition.

The great day arrived and was an unbelievable success. All Anna's friends and relations turned up in force. Every picture was sold. The critics were enthusiastic; it was the first time that Han encountered his future enemies. He was flattered by the accounts which he read in the papers next morning. Later in the day, there came a knock at his front door. With a flutter of excitement he found that it was the well-known critic, Karel de Boer. He wanted some information so that he could write a short article about Han and his paintings for

the weekly paper for which he worked. Han and Anna welcomed him into the house, and the interview began.

And then Han realized that he was hardly attending to the words of de Boer, as he asked him the expected questions. For it was Karel's wife, Jo, who had accompanied him, on whom he was focussing his attention. While Karel was talking she stood regarding Han, without commenting on the advice or suggestions which her husband was making; she had heard it all before. But to Han, Jo was something new—something new altogether. She was tall and dark; her home town, Han was to learn, was Zeeland, and Jo had picked up some of the Spanish blood which abounds there. Her family, indeed, had been country people, but she had quickly learned city ways, was at home in any company, and had the faculty which Han was soon to discover and admire of picking up the most attractive mannerisms and ways of speaking of those, chiefly her husband's friends, with whom she associated.

"I should like to paint Jo," was the unexpected reply which Han made to Karel's remarks. Karel had no objection. He was a dreamy fellow, and perhaps saw little that went on in the world around him. Thus the exhibition, which Anna had helped so industriously to prepare, resulted in Han's first encounter with Jo, who, twelve years later, was to become his second wife.

Chapter IV

THE five years which followed the 1916 exhibition were successful for Han professionally. Domestically, they were disastrous and these two effects of the exhibition were inter-related. He became quickly well-known and popular; his charm and humor were in demand among the hostesses of the city; he was invited to cocktail parties and social functions where he enjoyed himself immensely, and more and more often he was in the company of Jo. These outside interests drew him away from Anna, whilst at the same time the success which he was achieving carried him to greater efforts.

In 1917, after a visit to the country with Anna and the children, Han moved with his family to the Hague, where he was close to his diverse interests and which he could now afford. He was almost out of debt and was able to leave his job as assistant to Gips, preferring instead to take four or five pupils who came to him in a class once or so a week at rather irregular intervals, and whose parents paid well for the tuition which he gave

them. For its purpose and for his own work, Han took a studio in another part of the town, where he could be sure of being undisturbed. Often his pupils were the attractive and admiring daughters of well-to-do Hague business men, and it flattered and pleased Han to have them under his instruction.

Soon after he moved from Scheveningen to the Hague, Han was elected a member of the *Haagsche Kunstkring*—the Art Circle of the Hague—a select band of the city's writers, actors and painters, who met each week or so in the Ridderzall for a social evening, and for discussion and the exchange of ideas. At each meeting one member and his wife or girl friend of the moment would act as host and hostess. One evening, Han invited Jo to accompany him and Anna to a meeting of the circle. Anna had become used to remaining unnoticed by Han in the home, but now for the first time she found herself humiliated and made miserable in public. Han abandoned her early in the evening, and went off to dance with Jo and to introduce her to all his friends. Anna found little consolation in the looks of disapproval, for which Han cared nothing, and indeed even enjoyed. At these evenings Han used to sit in a corner of the room and do ten-minute charcoal drawings of members and their guests. This evening he gave extra time to a careful portrait of Jo; Anna was left entirely to herself, and early in the evening went off home, alone and in tears.

Han and Anna were divorced in 1923. The years till then were unhappy and difficult ones for Han and for

everyone who associated with him. Anna brought up the children as best she could, and learned to make any money she received from Han go as far as possible. Towards his children, Han's feelings were complex. It is impossible for any man of artistic or intellectual temperament not to love his own children in some corner of his heart. He has created them as he has created anything else; they are a part of him, his flesh and blood, his own. He desires to see them grow, to learn as he has learned; to teach them to have the courage that he has had, and perhaps, if he is wise, to avoid the errors into which he has fallen. All this Han felt, but at the same time he felt hostile towards them. They were ties to Anna—and he wanted to be free from her. They made life impossible at home with their constant noise. Yet he could not believe that it was his children who had driven him from his own fireside. Rather it was his love for them that had prolonged his marriage, his love and the remembrance of his former pride at being a father and having children of his own. So that though, in one way, he wanted to be free of them, in another he loved them dearly; and these contradictory feelings continually disturbed him. Away from home, he would delight in being for a while on his own; then, hearing a child's voice or seeing a curly head, he would remember his own children and be seized with a longing and compassion for them.

It was in 1921 that Han produced his best-known "original"—if so it may be termed to distinguish it from his "Vermeers"—which many will remember having
80]

seen in reproduction, though probably unaware of the artist's identity. It is a drawing of a deer which belonged to Princess Juliana, and which he had been using as a model for his pupils. Each week it came to his studio from the Royal Palace. At each visit Han made a new sketch, as well as making the necessary corrections to the work of his young ladies; after six months one of them said to him: "You should know the animal well enough by now to draw it yourself in ten minutes." He took up the challenge, did it in nine minutes, and it is this swift piece of work which remains as the best known van Meegeren. The original was never sold but remained in the possession of Han and Jo. It is now said to be the most reproduced picture in Holland, and can be seen in countless shop windows on calendars and postcards.

In the same year Han held his second exhibition, at which he showed exclusively pictures of a religious kind. Later, each one of his faked Vermeers was also to have a biblical subject. This was strange in a man of Han's beliefs. Han had "thrown religion overboard" at the time of his brother Herman's death in 1911, when Herman had been at his seminary for four years. Of delicate health, he had fallen ill, had run a high temperature, and was sent home from the seminary before he had fully recovered. At home he had had a long illness; and Han believed this was because he had been moved home when he was very ill. After many months he began to get strong and well again but then had a sudden relapse and died. Han, perhaps because of the rigorous churchgoing habit which his father had im-

posed on his family, had never attached much importance to church affairs and was sorry for Herman, shut away against his will in what both brothers considered a prison. On the death of Herman, whom he dearly loved, all his bitterness was released; he believed that the monks had been responsible and never afterwards took any part in church affairs. None the less there was a continual conflict in his mind on the worrying subject of God.

Life (to summarize Han's standpoint) is very much easier for those who believe in God. He is always there to give comfort and advice, and when life becomes particularly hopeless and purposeless, it is possible to find in religious faith both relief and reason. If a man becomes older and finds less and less being achieved, and fails more and more, in any case, to see the purpose of achievement, religion is a great standby. Before the prospect of eternal life, the success or failure of the few years of struggle here fade into significance. One is no longer exposed to internal conflicts which must be determined *ad hoc* whenever a big decision has to be made; there stands the rule of the church, everlasting and unalterable. All this, however, Han refused to accept. "That is *why* it is accepted by the godly," he would say when the subject was discussed. "Life is so foul if there is no God to believe in. It is very comforting and very helpful for them I'm sure; but I'm afraid it doesn't prove God's existence for me. Life is cruel, and life is hard, and soon we will all be dead; but so long as we realize this and act accordingly, instead of wasting our mortal life in

the hopes of attaining a mythical one which is everlasting, we will have achieved as much as we could in any other way whatever."

So he argued; but like any artist, or anyone who detests dogma, whether it be orthodox or not, he could never entirely convince himself. The Bible and religion had been hammered into him throughout his childhood; he had learned most of the Bible by heart and had gone to church every Sunday for fifteen years. He was also irrationally fascinated by the mysticism of religion; by its very unknown nature and by irrational hope which was never dispelled from his mind. These thoughts and fancies, which he would never have admitted in public or to his friends, found expression in his pictures.

It seems evident, too, that in Christ he saw a magnified reflection of himself. He did not deny that Christ had existed. He looked upon Him as a great prophet and a man of learning, but most of all he looked upon Him as a man who had suffered. Han loved to indulge in self-pity, to look upon himself already as a great artist whose paintings never received the appreciation they deserved, who suffered silently and whose soul was pierced by the arrows of mankind. He cursed the fate which had led him into a troubled marriage, and would never admit any error or shortcoming on his own part. He suffered, he believed, as Christ had suffered; he, too, had a crown of thorns to wear. When he painted his pictures of Christ crucified, he was painting pictures of himself. The crowned head was his own portrait, which

none of his friends or enemies recognized, and which perhaps he did not recognize himself.

Han's second exhibition was again a success. His meticulous attention to detail and choice of colors received general praise. He was given good notices in the press, with one exception. One Dutch paper carried no comment on his work, and the reason is an important one. Han, who was now 32, had been approached at the time by a well-known writer from a leading Dutch paper, and the interview almost ended in blows. The journalist had told Han, in effect, that he could ensure him a good advertisement for his work—at a price: "I'll give you space if you pay for it." Han was first amazed, then shocked, then mad with anger. He had had no idea that such a suggestion was possible. He told the critic exactly what he thought of him, and it was in this critic's paper that no account of his exhibition appeared.

Whilst of course there were exceptions—and nowadays things have changed—there seems little doubt of the venality at this time of sections of the Dutch press, and this was the first occasion on which Han discovered it. It was his first brush with the critics; the fight was to go on until his death, and it was only with his death that the final round was won.

Two years after his second exhibition, in 1923, Han's marriage with Anna came to an end. As he looked back on them then, he realized what a strain they had been, those last years when he and Anna had never been able to agree, and had quarrelled more and more over trifles. He was a great deal happier when at last Anna saw that

she had no hope of reclaiming him and that divorce would at once give her greater security and independence. The divorce over, the children were put in charge of a governess in the Hague, while Anna went to Paris, to avoid any contact with the man who had been her husband. She saw little of Han for the remainder of his life.

It was not till 1929 that he married Jo, and the six years between his two marriages were in every way unsatisfactory. He made no progress in the artistic world, and he lost many friends through his personal conduct. To such an extent did Han outrage society in the Hague that in the end, after he had married Jo, he decided to leave Holland for good and all, as he then intended, and set up house in the South of France where nobody knew him or cared about him. Han held that he was bound by no moral code except his own, and had sufficient charm and a sufficiently strong character to carry this off to a certain extent. Many refused to have anything to do with him, and then forgave him and forgave him again, because he had a powerful and interesting nature, was well-read and able to talk on a large variety of subjects, had an amusing and original sense of humor and at any gathering was likely to become at once the center and the inspiration—the position in which he was happiest. Intensely energetic when he wanted to be, he was careless of any opinion but his own; volatile in the extreme, good-humored among his friends; small and wiry with sharp eager features, always aware of what was going on around him, impulsive and impetuous.

Jo at this time was not yet divorced from Karel; but, even if she had been, Han's passion for freedom would have prevented him from attaching himself at once to someone else. His life had become looser and wilder than ever. He was making more money than he had made before, but after the first surprise at his increased income, he found, as always happens, that he still did not earn as much as he required. An allowance went by law to Anna for herself and the children. He began to find that the rest melted more quickly than he expected.

At first, when he began on occasions to receive fees of from five hundred dollars for portraits, and a regular forty dollars a week for giving lessons in painting, this had seemed like a fortune to one who had made perhaps ten dollars a week from his earlier pictures. During the time when he was accustoming himself to the new standard, he spent less than he earned and it was thus that he managed to rid himself of at least the most pressing of his debts. But one's needs increase or diminish with one's income, though there is a time-lag when there is a sudden rise or fall. By 1923, when he had paid all the expenses of litigation and divorce, he was in very much the same financial state as during the war years. That is to say, he spent all his available income as soon as he got it and then ran into debt till he received his next payment. The fact that he was making more money only enabled him to live at a greater pace, without improving his stability. He found difficulty in attaining the degree of self-discipline and application which is as necessary as inspiration in an artist's life. That restless-

86]

ness which was his weakness was always present; that need to have admirers about him, which drove him out into the streets, which forced him to accept any invitation to a party or a celebration; that lack of organization in his work, which drove him to start on a new canvas before an earlier one had been completed, to abandon that in favor of a third, and to chuck all three into the background and go off with a girl friend to the country.

Han was also disturbed as he found that the easiest way of earning a living was by painting those pictures which he himself least admired and enjoyed. By 1923 he had gained a reputation for portraiture; commissions to paint the portraits of society came frequently, and he never failed to satisfy his clients. But this kind of work never satisfied himself. He knew just the result which was expected by his patrons, and this he could produce, easily and well. But he regarded it as something apart from his duty as an artist, and far preferred working on a still life, or a group of peasants, or his girl friend with nothing on. He discovered, however, that these pictures were difficult to sell, although their accomplishment gave satisfaction.

Established, then, as an artist, he was faced with the choice between being honest to himself and painting the pictures he desired, and being the servant of those rich Dutch families who were prepared to pay a thousand guilders for a van Meegeren portrait. There is no doubt how he would have chosen ten years before. Then his heart was aflame with idealism and he was only

concerned with those things which he desired; and he did not care for the approval or disdain of the world. Now he was less sure; he had experienced and enjoyed reasonable affluence and did not know which course he would take.

At this time Han's closest friend was Theo van Wijngaarden,* an artist of his own age whom he had known for many years. Theo was in many ways like Han, but had achieved less success as an artist and made his living chiefly by restoring pictures, at which he was an expert. He was also something of an *entrepreneur* of the arts, buying pictures cheaply in one part of Europe, restoring them himself if necessary, and selling them in another. Han had learned much from Theo; both in his work of restoration and in distinguishing between the genuine and the genuinely old, and the imitations, ancient or modern. Disgruntled by his lack of success with the pictures which he himself enjoyed, Han went with his problem to his friend.

"It's crazy, my dear Theo, crazy!" he said in exasperation. "Anyone can paint these wretched portraits, and sell them too, for a good price. The lady's nose must be a little shorter, or the gentleman's forehead a little more distinguished, or the child's expression a little less asinine, and then you are hailed at once as a genius—by your client. Of course what you think of yourself, or what the artists think, is quite another question. But for these 'creations' I am paid a good price—by the standards to which *we* are accustomed—and for the paintings

* pronounced Táo vun Váne-harden.

on which I spend weeks of study and inspiration I receive not a brass farthing, as likely as not."

Van Wijngaarden looked thoughtfully at Han. Like all his friends, Theo had been distressed by his changed relations with Anna and by the divorce, and was now disturbed by the wild and unsettling life which his friend was leading. He knew that Han was the last person in the world who would listen in the ordinary way to advice from anyone, and that if any were fool enough to tell him outright that he must settle down and accept obligations, it would drive him promptly in the opposite direction. Yet on this occasion (Theo felt) Han had come to him for advice, however reluctantly; he was determined to do his best to help him were it possible, but it was a question of how he could best be made to listen. Useless to hope that he would yet settle down to a more reasonable and orthodox existence; but at least he must be made to see that he would be a fool to refuse these lucrative offers, simply because he preferred to paint something else.

"You know, Han, we are all in the same position, we artists," he said at last. "Not one among us who can earn his keep, and maybe the keep of his family too, by inspiration alone. Look at me, if that will help you: I sell a picture from time to time, but do you imagine that the money I receive would so much as pay for my drinks and cigarettes? You—oh, yes, you sell more pictures than most of us, but then you have expensive tastes, my friend; and besides you have a family to support. How

can you hope to satisfy your demands—and the needs of your family as well?”

Han was silent. He disliked criticism of any sort, and he disliked it all the more if he knew that it was justified. He sat back in his chair and puffed at his cigar, while he waited for Theo to continue. “Any moralizing and I’m off,” he thought to himself. But Theo knew better than that.

“All of us must prostitute ourselves to some extent,” he said. “We must be hard; unless or until we are accepted as geniuses we must be prepared to commercialize ourselves to some extent. But we must be prostitutes who can at the same time carry on an *affaire de coeur*; we must be able to walk the streets till midnight and then return to the arms of our beloved. Painting, or music, or whatever it may be, is our first love, our *grand amour*, but it does not pay for our daily bread; or at least, if it does, it doesn’t pay for our jam. That we must earn by our harlotry, though we must retain our capacity for love. And, Han, do you know, I do not believe it is impossible!”

Han enjoyed the metaphor. He leaned forward, waited a moment, thought things over, and began to talk rapidly.

“Look here, Theo, d’you really think that’s true?” he asked with a smile. “I was speaking to a . . . well, to a girl the other night and she told me she had lost any faculty she possessed for the enjoyment of love-making. Love-making was her profession, you see. She had no boy friend, and only looked forward to a vague,

indefinite, loveless marriage, in which some degree of security would be ensured, but no passion, no desire, no inspiration. I am an artist, Theo, and to artists that is something sacred. This commercialization that you talk about; doesn't it encroach slowly and insidiously upon a man's real work; will it not infuse something indefinable, but something second rate, into all the work that he does?"

Theo saw that though Han spoke vehemently he wanted to be contradicted. "And it's the only way he'll ever get himself out of his hopeless money troubles," he thought to himself. "Of course it will not," he replied; "so long as you can control it. We must achieve the position of the harlot who still enjoys the embraces of her own lover. That we can do by keeping in touch with the artistic world, by continuing with the pictures we *want* to paint as well as doing other work which brings in the shekels—cleansing our faces of the paint of commerce as we return each night from the office, and assuming it again in the morning. That is the way in which, in the end, we can abandon prostitution altogether for the arms of our love! It is how we can remain artists, and indulge our fancies at the same time!"

It was perhaps the only way in which Theo could have made Han listen, and he knew that it was. Han's nose had screwed up at the mention of an office. "I have a strange feeling that there is some connection, not the least etymological, between 'shekels' and 'shackles,'" he said wryly. "As for an office, I know well that I could not stick it out for a week. And I feel as though com-

mercial art, for instance, is a drug; a man begins to paint posters, or wallpaper, or what-you-will, as he begins to take cocaine. It takes up more and more of his life, and in the end it takes up all his life. He is too tired when he returns from the day's labor to do any of the work he really desires."

"Not if he is strong," said Theo. "Not if he has sufficient genius to be an embryo genius; and *unless* he has sufficient, he had better abandon the idea from the start. But if it is important enough, he will write, or paint, or sculpt, whatever else he does the rest of the time. Remember Jan Ubink in his newspaper office. He spends his whole day writing stories in words of one syllable, and paragraphs of twenty words, which are read by millions next morning. In the evenings he writes sonnets, and he's working on a book. You'll find damned little of the work he does by day in the work he does by night. Or you might have a job like me; one that doesn't actually involve painting, but one that is associated with it. It's interesting work, and I'm paid a regular salary. In addition, I manage to paint a picture each week, and I sell most of those that I finish."

Han was impressed. Some time before he had met a man who earned his living by painting posters. His work was trash, but he was very well paid for it. An idea had occurred to Han and had been instantly dismissed. Now it returned, and he thought it over. Perhaps he himself would be able to make money in the same way. Perhaps that was a solution. "I must go," he said to Theo. "Thank you for your advice, I'll think it over."

And some time you must tell me more about your work—your work as a prostitute, I mean, of course.”

They roared with laughter. “Only too glad,” said Theo. “There’s more to it than perhaps you think.”

Han did indeed think it over. He had been foolish to persist in his doubts! If people paid well for work that he despised, why in the world should he refuse their offers? By working hard in this way, and putting some money on one side—if only he could learn to save!—he would one day achieve the final independence. He would be able to work only on the pictures which he admired, and care not at all for the plaudits of the world! He had established himself as a painter; he was able to earn his living, and a reasonably good one, solely by his brush, which at Delft had been a principal ambition. The next stage was to free himself from the absence of choice; he felt sure that with time he would succeed. Had not a thousand done the same before him? Was he not a fool to refuse to follow their example?

And thus his fortunes improved. He increased his income in many ways: he painted at least a portrait a month, which brought his best returns; from time to time he designed a poster for an advertising campaign, work which amused him and was well rewarded. He continued to give instruction from time to time, though at increasingly irregular intervals, to those young people whose parents could afford his fees. Once he was offered a contract by an American agent; he was invited for a year to the States with all his expenses paid; while in America he was to paint fifty portraits, and for each he

would receive his usual fee; it would mean that he would return with \$15,000 in his pocket, yet he refused the offer. "A portrait a week—even from me, that is too much to ask!" Han had said. "It would be the end of all freedom for ever, it would leave no part of myself; no, my friend, I assure you, there are limits to prostitution." He preferred to earn less, but enough, in Holland; it was delightful to be able to relax from time to time, his bank balance sufficient to see him safely through a week or two if need be.

But Han discovered that his artistic reputation fell, almost as quickly as his bank balance improved. He was not alone in the condemnation which he felt for himself in his heart. If the critics were less pleased with his portraits than were his clients, they laughed outright at his posters. Han affected a vigorous indifference to these reactions. "It is only my reputation in my own eyes that matters," he would say; "I know perfectly well that my work is as good now as it was when I didn't paint bathing beauties; and if appreciation of the former is blunted by my attention to the latter, then really I do not mind. The demand justifies and creates its own supply. I am paid ten times as much by Messrs. Bloggs for my commercial drawings as I receive from the æsthetes for my works of art; if they want more of the works of art, or if they wish me to desist from my 'third-class commercial stuff,' as they call it, then let them pay more for the former and the need for the latter vanishes. It is a matter of indifference to me, so long as I have enough

money to jingle in my pocket, and enough time to paint real pictures which I, at least, appreciate."

In spite of the superficial comfort these reflections brought him, he was of course far from satisfied. He would have loved nothing more than to receive the fees of the leading Dutch painters and thus be able to cut himself free from more commercial activities. Unable to achieve this, he exaggerated his assumed indifference to his reputation; and thus his bitterness grew against the public and the critics. "They themselves cannot paint, yet they take it upon them to decide whether our work is good," he would say to his friends. "As often as not they are themselves would-be artists—the would-be artists of years ago—who could never make good themselves, and now earn their livelihood in the criticism of those who have. They judge by a name," he would shout. "They judge when they know who has painted, when they have discovered if the artist is in fashion. There is prejudice, there is ignorance. But there is no appreciation."

It is easy to trace to his birth and his environment the causes of the restlessness and discontent which Han experienced. His stern upbringing; his sudden release to freedom; his natural artistic proclivities; the necessity which kept him after he had left Delft in the same surroundings where, even after graduation, he kept the heritage of student days. And if a principal function of the University is to cure such restlessness—to enable the first-year student to "settle down" and to stabilize himself in the way of life in which he will most benefit

himself and the community—then also there are those “perpetual students” who must run headlong from the undergraduate city if they are ever to achieve what they desire in their hearts. It was to this class that Han belonged: it would take many years to find work which absorbed him sufficiently to dull the glitter of distractions; it was for this work, when at last he found it, that he is known by the world and admired or condemned.

The training in care which he had learned from Korteing was forgotten. He did many sketches in a few moments, and lacked the concentration to complete more accomplished work. He sent pictures to public exhibitions and from time to time they were accepted; more frequently they were refused, to his rage and disgust. He had a typical experience at the Pulchri Studio—an important exhibition for which one of his paintings had been accepted; he arrived at the studio and at first could not see it. It was certainly not in the main room; it had not been given pride of place as he had hoped. He walked round all the exhibition without noticing it. Then, as he was about to leave, he at last found it, hidden away in the darkest corner where nobody could see it, and in a back room which many would not visit. Such was the enmity shown to Han at this time; but he never forgot that moment and worked for its revenge.

Han was maddened by his critics; he remembered the words which had been spoken to him at an early exhibition by one who had wished to befriend him. “I’ve enjoyed some of your work,” he had said. “But why can’t you learn to concentrate upon one particular me-

96]

dium, instead of experimenting with everything you see? Some of these oil paintings are in the first class, but nobody will look at your rough charcoal portraits to which you have given no attention. The critics and public will appreciate you more if, at your next exhibition, you show only the worthwhile stuff, and discriminate more carefully between that which you display and that which you relegate to the attic. We critics are over-inclined to comment on a general impression rather than on individual pictures, and in writing about the chaff, we sometimes overlook the grain."

"Then you are fools," Han had said when he was alone. "You are admitting your incompetence, that absence of discrimination which you yourself condemn, of the critical faculty which should be your stock-in-trade. Besides, the least important part of any picture has become the *most* important: the signature is the shibboleth by which all is judged. What matters most is that it should be known beforehand if a picture has been painted by a fashionable artist. Is not all the evidence exactly in this direction? If a picture is sold for a fortune, in the belief that it is by a great artist, and if then it is learned that it's by that artist's *apprentice*, then its value in the market dwindles to a hundredth. Yet is it not the same picture? Does it not afford the same delight? What else is the criterion by which its value can be judged?"

In early days, Han had been content to keep to himself his opinion of the critics. But their antagonism, their ignorance (as he believed) and their venality drove

him to tell them what he thought; they criticized him the more, and he became ruder. "These fawning painters," he would say, "who have splendid parties and invite all the cretins who in the papers next week will tell the world what they think of their work; by Christ, it isn't hard to achieve success that way. Bribery runs wild in Holland! I have only to give a banquet tonight and butter up the critics and they will be in ecstasies next time they see one of my pictures! I'll have no part in it! They know nothing of their subject! The devil take them!"

So the critics were excluded from his entertainments, and their view of his work became even more derogatory. Han didn't care. He was earning almost all he wanted one way and another, though he seldom saved a penny. Nor was he concerned in the least with the general condemnation by many of his associates of his personal behavior. "I apologize to no one," he would say. "This is the kind of man I am, and nothing will change it. My life as an artist demands that I should be free from all obligations and from every tie. That is the way it is with me, and if my friends don't like it, honesty to, well, myself is more important than their friendship. I make no concessions whatever."

Chief at this time among Han's friends were Theo van Wijngaarden and a writer called Jan Ubink who had mixed journalism, authorship and school-teaching; while still a teacher (he had been a pupil of Han's father) his literary ambitions had been predominant, and he had begun to contribute articles to the Hague

98]

newspapers. These were accepted more and more frequently; soon he was offered a column by the *Vaderland* and he left his school. But Jan's ambition was to write *books*; he had achieved in the literary field that position which Han had achieved in the artistic: he was, at least, making a living by his pen, though unable to do so in the way he would prefer. The years slipped by and Jan hardly noticed them passing; occasionally a book was published, but never earned enough to make him free; in the meantime he had become a good journalist. But his success did not obliterate his disappointment; in his heart he knew that he was becoming old and that he would never achieve what he had once expected. Thus there was an affinity between Jan and his two friends: he believed with Han and Theo that it was impossible to live by his true trade, that his talent had not been appreciated and that now there was nothing to be done. In 1926, banding themselves together, they brought out a monthly journal entitled *De Kempphaan* (The Fighting Cock) to express their sentiments. This enterprise helped them, in so far as it gave them the opportunity of letting off steam once a month; but it made new enemies and confirmed in their opinion those previously hostile.

"The Fighting Cock" (it had been Han's idea) was intended to expose the superficiality of modern art and painting. It was opposed to almost everything; opposed to surrealism which, it believed, was understood by and understandable to no one, certainly not to its authors; opposed in particular to the critics who wrote fine ar-

ticles about the surrealists, tried to see things that were not there, and knew nothing about Art. Its revelations of venality were all but actionable. "The Fighting Cock" was written violently and sarcastically by the three rebels; each issue was entirely from their three barbed pens, though that this should be disguised they wrote under any number of names beside their own. Written and sold in the Hague, *De Kempphaan* did not succeed; it lasted rather more than a year and died a natural death.

In his discussions with Theo, both on the subject of *De Kempphaan* and, in the ordinary way, as between two old friends, Han learned much; Theo was stimulating and sympathetic, which Han enjoyed. Many enterprises they undertook together; often they joined forces to work on some unusual business which they could carry out together. If they heard, perhaps, that valuable paintings were going in Italy or England for a song, they would take themselves off to that part of the world, appraise the paintings themselves, and import them to Holland where they made a good profit. Through work of this kind, and through Theo's instruction, Han became more equipped for his final achievements. But it was his discussion one evening with his friend which placed the first germs in his fertile mind.

Chapter V

ONE evening, after the three friends had discussed the next issue of the magazine, Theo and Han were left alone after Jan had gone home. They were smoking and drinking, and Han was about to leave when Theo called him back. "No, my friend, do not take yourself off just yet," he said. "There is a thing I must tell you, something which will make you laugh and give you something to think about."

Han sat down, poured himself another *Bols*, and listened. "I'm ready," he said. "Let me have it."

"I've no doubt you remember Dr. Bredius," said Theo. "And Dr. Hofstede de Groot—the great connoisseurs."

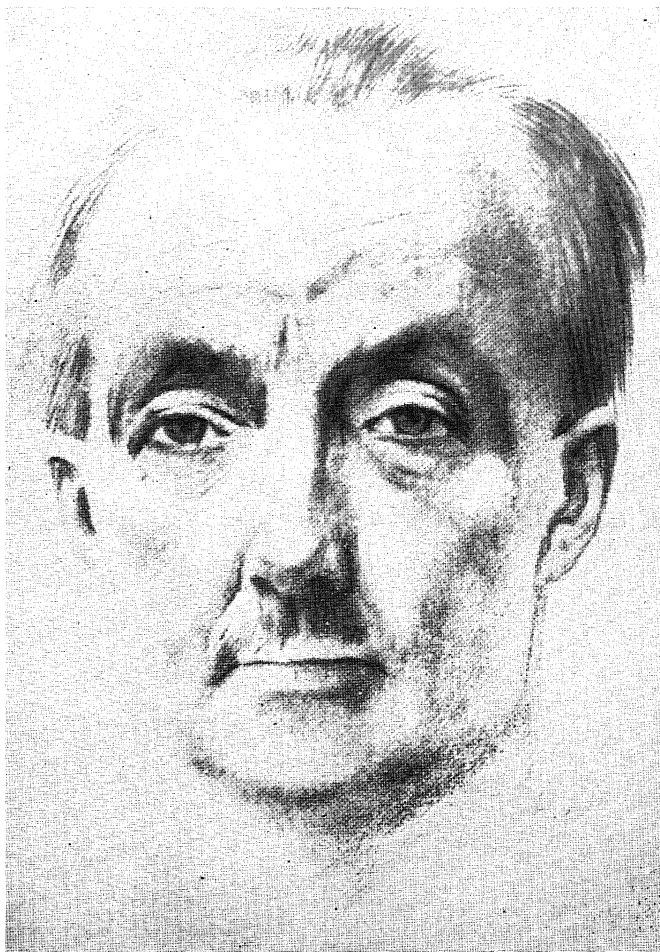
An explosion from Han indicated that he was aware of the existence of these two gentlemen, and a great deal more besides.

"Well let me remind you," continued Theo, undisturbed, "of the occasion last year when Dr. Bredius was unwilling to accept as genuine a genuine Frans Hals.

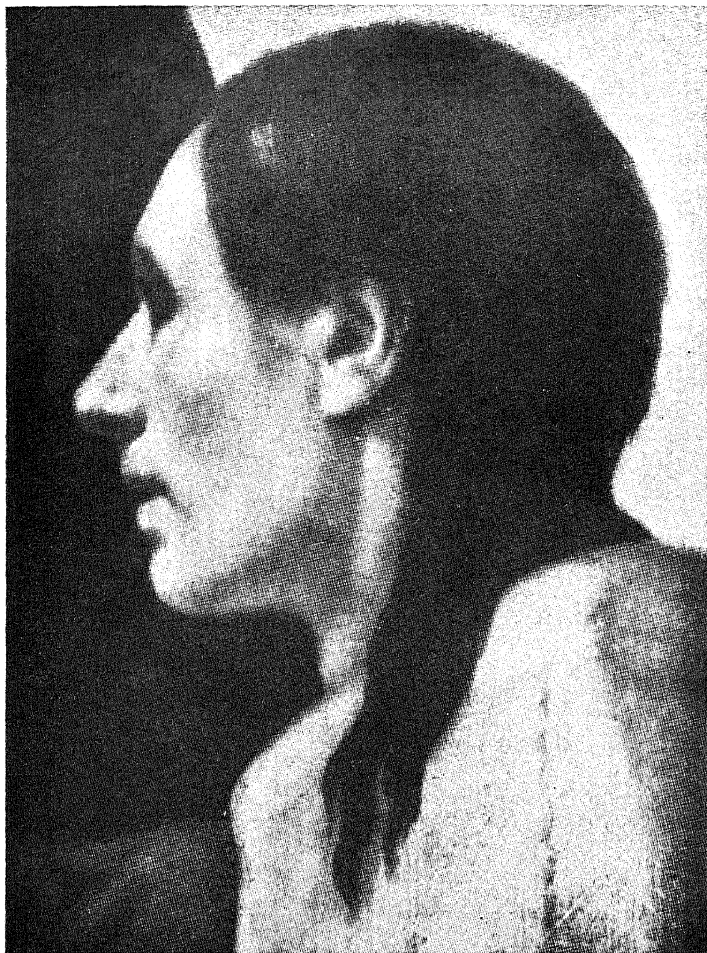
"I had bought a lot of pictures and one was a Hals—a portrait of a cavalier, a Laughing Cavalier if you like—which I knew was genuine the moment I saw it. It had certainly been painted in the time of Hals, for the canvas itself belonged to that period; and the paint was as hard as a rock. Besides, the style and brushwork were unmistakably Hals, though on that particular point there was never a dispute."

It should be mentioned here that the "dryness" of paint is of special importance in the authentication of a picture; or rather in determining if it is of any antiquity. In the ordinary way, an oil painting needs half a century to dry completely; that is to say, for fifty years there remain some traces of the medium. This was to be Han's chief difficulty when he began to paint "Vermeers." Such paint, besides, is indissoluble in alcohol; indissoluble, for that matter, by any usual method. This provides the first and easiest method by which pictures, allegedly old, may be tested: if the paint is not hard the picture may be at once dismissed as inauthentic; if it is, the test is of course not conclusive and other examinations must follow. It was part of Theo's business to be well-acquainted with such processes; he and Han had often discussed the subject and had been interested in discovering methods, both of hardening new paint and dissolving old. For these would be of value both in work of restoration, and in testing the age of pictures before buying them.

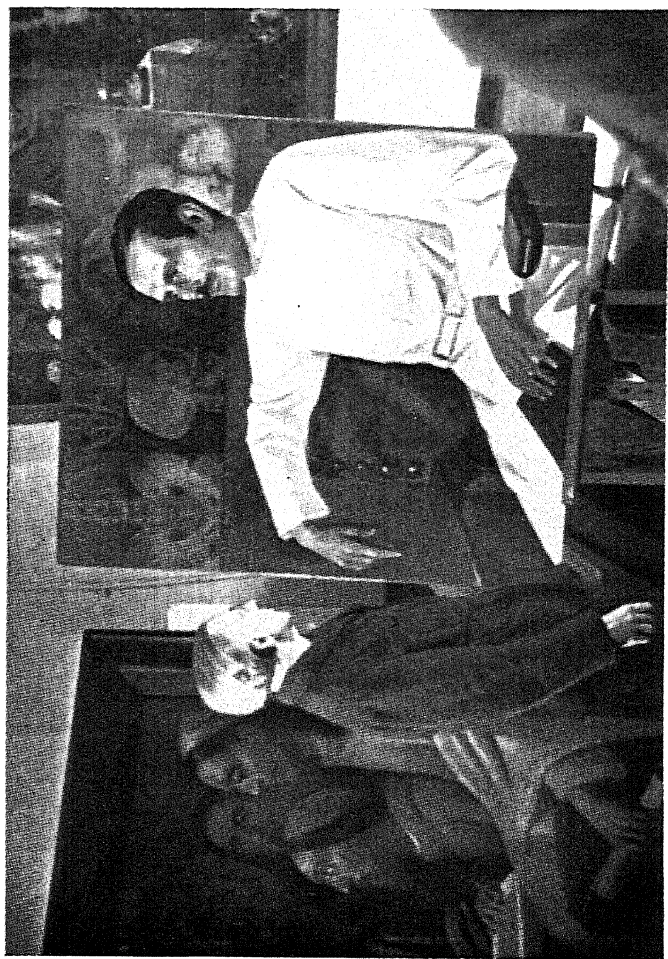
"I restored this picture," continued Theo, "and in doing so used new oils with which we had been experi-



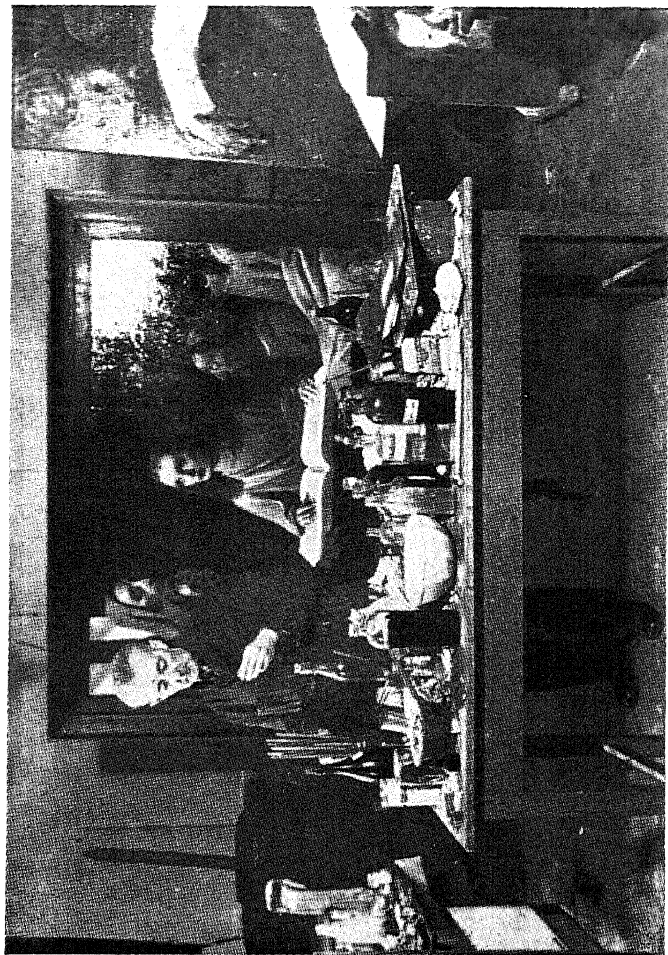
HAN VAN MEEGEREN, A SELF-PORTRAIT



A DETAIL FROM "CHRIST AT EMMAUS"



HAN VAN MEEGEREN IN FRONT OF ONE OF HIS "MODERN" PORTRAITS



HAN VAN MEEGEREN AT WORK IN HIS STUDIO ON THE "YOUNG CHRIST"

menting. These had the effect which I expected: of rather softening the paint in the original picture. It was certified as a Hals by de Groot, and sold by him to a private buyer.

"Months afterwards it was seen by Bredius and denounced. He agreed that the style was authentic but pointed to the softness of the paint. I could not convince him that this was due to the methods I had used in restoration. 'The paint is not hard, the paint is not hard'—that was all that he would say. Now, although Dr. Bredius has standing and a reputation, I am confident myself that he knows no more than I do about his subject. I was angry that he disagreed, but then, as you know, it is not the first time I have disagreed with Dr. Bredius and I don't expect it will be the last. I knew he would be coming back to my studio this morning and I decided to teach him a lesson. So I painted a Rembrandt."

Han sat bolt upright in his chair. He had been frankly bored by all he had heard till that moment; it was all "old stuff" and he could not understand why Theo was going over ground which they had covered hundreds of times before—the total incompetence of "connoisseur" and "expert" in matters of this kind. Suddenly, Theo had said something new, something which interested him profoundly, something akin to ideas which had been hiding at the back of his mind for many months.

"My dear Han, there's no need to give such a jump!" said Theo with a broad grin, for he was pleased to have aroused Han with such effect from his reverie. "I have

always thought I could do it. and so this time I damned well did do it. I sat in my studio for three weeks, and I simply painted a Rembrandt. I hung it in my studio with the others for his inspection; and they included, by the way, those very charming Chinese ivories which we picked up so cheaply the other day. It was the ivories which first caught his attention. 'Birmingham, 1925' he said—and that made me cross as I'm sure they're authentic. Then he turned to the pictures and he noticed mine at once. 'It's pleasant to find something clearly genuine for a change' said he after inspecting the signature. 'An evident Rembrandt—I congratulate you.' Then I told him the truth—that it had been painted in that very studio during the preceding weeks!"

The two artists rocked with laughter. It was the kind of practical joke which they loved better than any other, besides being a practical vindication of their convictions. What fools they are, these connoisseurs! A genuine Frans Hals they dismiss as a fake! A genuine van Wijngaarden they pass as a Rembrandt! What was the use of it all? What did it matter if pictures were praised or condemned by such a crowd of ignorant fools? "It proves to the hilt the convictions we have held for so long," said Han. "But, tell me, now, Theo, what happened to the 'Rembrandt'?"

"I ripped it in pieces with my palette-knife," said Theo. "'A priceless treasure?' I said. 'Then it's the first time you've admitted that van Wijngaarden ever painted a priceless treasure. And here's all I care for it,' I added. 'I could paint another like it any time you

104]

want one.' I'm afraid I won't be seeing very much of him in the future . . ."

Han was silent for a while. "Of course it was only a small 'masterpiece'?" he asked his friend.

"Oh yes, quite small, wouldn't have been worth much if it *had* been genuine; and of course if it had been bigger, and worth potentially more, it would have been subject to every kind of test, which would have revealed its true nature. I took no real trouble with it technically. It was on an old canvas which I bought and cleaned; and of course I manufactured my paints in the authentic style. But the simplest tests would have revealed my mischief—it was finished yesterday. The whole thing I looked upon as simply a joke; just something to bolster up my confidence and my professional pride; nothing more than that."

"Yes, yes," said Han. "I understand that perfectly. The ridiculous thing is that in this case no proper test was called for. It depends, in fact, upon the whim of the examiner; here he was content to rely upon his failing eyesight; were it not for your honesty, that picture would be in circulation today. How many hundreds have been similarly made? Once Dr. Bredius, or another of his kind, has attached his name to that of the supposed artist, nobody thereafter will ask any questions. But here is a question I should like you to answer. Supposing you had *sold* this 'Rembrandt,' for five thousand dollars; whom would you defraud?"

This was a dangerous subject, and they both knew that it was dangerous. It had often been discussed be-

fore, though in a different way. The friends knew as well as anyone that, of the large number of Old Masters at present in existence, a great proportion must be fakes. The figure has been variously estimated, and here at any rate is unimportant. But the argument runs something on these lines. If a rich family is convinced that a picture is a Rembrandt—or a Vermeer, or a Tintoretto, or whatever it may be—or, more likely, if they accept the assurance of the Bredii of this world that it is genuine, since they are incapable of forming a judgment of their own—are they in any way disappointed or deceived if in fact the picture is one of the fakes of which thousands are currently in circulation? It is well known that many believed “Old Masters” are in fact the work of unknown contemporaries of the same school who were able through constant study to produce work practically indistinguishable from the work of their teachers. If such a painting comes in to the hands of a wealthy man, and comes, let us say, as a Tintoretto, the purchaser is a happy man with the provision (which must be admitted) that its authenticity is never questioned. His æsthetic taste is insufficiently advanced to be less satisfied by his possession than by a true original, and, which is more important, his pride is still untouched. He can still place the picture in a prominent position in the hall, or in the drawing room, and point out (in an offhand way) “my Tintoretto” to all his visitors. He paid ten thousand at an auction in the Hague, but then he is known to be worth half a million; very well, who has suffered?

On these lines the two friends had spoken before—academically and hypothetically, when speaking of the ignorance of the great mass of the public, and discussing the age-old question, with them a popular one, whether the unknown artist receives his deserts, or whether paintings are not judged by the name alone; whether, once a reputation had been established, any amount of trash could not be sold without trouble and for a high price. So they had talked before, and the idea had probably occurred secretly to both Han and Theo of trying it out—of going ahead and *painting* an Old Master and seeing what happened. Now Theo had done it and his “Rembrandt” had been accepted by an eminent critic. He had taken it no further than that.

They knew they were on dangerous ground. They knew that it would be better and safer to abandon the subject and never to discuss it again. And they never did. They laughed again over the old joke, and discussed the matter with its æsthetic and moral implications, and then Han got up and went home and soon afterwards dismissed the idea from his mind. He was, in any case, far too preoccupied with his forthcoming marriage to Jo.

Anna at this time—1929—had gone off to Sumatra and had taken the children with her. This project had met with steady opposition from Han. Anna had received a letter from her mother, whom she had long thought dead, and had set her heart upon travelling to the Indies and seeing her for the first time that she could remember. In the end Han agreed, and paid

An's allowance for a year in advance. While she was away, Han at last married Jo.

He was fed up with Holland, with his friends, with lack of appreciation, with everything in life. It was no good, he felt, to continue as before. With his marriage to Jo, he hoped to start afresh, to leave Holland, to set up house where nobody knew him and where he could begin again from the beginning. His financial affairs were for the time being more favorable and after three years he managed with Jo's assistance to save enough cash to move from the Hague and to buy a house elsewhere. He was tired of his friends' criticism of his personal behavior. He was tired of the Hague society, which he felt to be closing in on him, to be stale and dull. Above all, he was constantly irritated and disturbed by continual associations with Anna: friends of them both in their honeymoon days, who now avoided him or were embarrassed when they met him by chance; places they had visited together. It was even impossible for him to work in the studio where they had had those terrible scenes.

In the summer of 1932, he and Jo took a holiday together. They bought a car in Holland—the first and last Han was ever to possess—and set out for the Riviera by way of Paris and Italy. Throughout the trip, new ideas were turning in the mind of Han. The initial relief of leaving Holland was replaced as they drove South by a growing bitterness against those who had made his exodus necessary. He was convinced that he was a great artist; angry that no one in Holland would give credit

108]

which he believed to be due to him. Somewhere in the course of their journey they would find a pleasant home far from the Hague, where they would settle down together and forget the past. Yet he would make the Dutch critics change their minds before he died! He would force them to acknowledge the talent which he possessed! Han was strangely moody and silent as the two lovers sped through the countryside towards Italy. Jo knew that strange thoughts were going on in his mind, but she was wise enough to say nothing.

Supposing *I* were to paint a Rembrandt, thought Han. If Theo could do it, and get away with it, then I could do the same. But I'll do it on the grand scale: it will be a large canvas; I will go the whole length and sell it in Holland to the highest bidder, when it has been acclaimed by all as an original. And then, when they hand me the check, I will tear it up in their faces, and tell them that they are fools. Theo had the right idea; I will take it to its conclusion. I will fool the world. I will show them that their standards are all at sea, that they know nothing of the subject in which they pretend to be expert. I will prove that those who have ignored my work have done so because they know nothing of their business. . . .

Yet why a Rembrandt? That was what Theo chose; but I will do better. I will paint a Vermeer, the most admired of my countrymen. I will paint a Vermeer, whose work I have already studied closely, with whose technique and methods I am already familiar. . . .

Perhaps I will sell it to the Dutch State. Perhaps it

will hang in one of the National Museums, the marvel of every beholder. That would be the final vindication of my beliefs. That would prove beyond doubt my conviction that pictures are judged by their supposed author, and not by any intrinsic merit—unless it be admitted that my own technique is on a level with Vermeer. . . .

Yes, of course, they would have to admit that that was so. Only two courses would be open to them, once my picture had been accepted. Either they would be compelled to admit that their judgment was at fault; and they are too proud to do that. Or they would be compelled to say, when confronted with the truth, that my picture was indeed a counterfeit, but that the finished work is equal to the original. And then they could explain why they have never acclaimed any of my other works.

South, South, South; further and further from the stale streets of the Hague, across the Italian frontier, across the peninsula to Venice and down to Rome. And all the way these thoughts were turning in the mind of Han. I will tell no one of my plans, not even Jo, he determined. It will be a secret to myself until the great day comes when the world is fooled, and I can tell the world; I will find a studio where I can work without interruption and I will trust no one with my secret. At last, at last; here is some work after my own heart; here is something which will engross me and keep me at my easel till the job's done. Hurry, hurry! There is no time to lose! Let's start at once.

Along the Mediterranean coast, back towards France, and as his mind became determined Han became more talkative, full of confidence and relief. "We'll find a villa in the South," he told Jo with enthusiasm. "Somewhere close to a smart resort, where I can earn a good living by painting rich visitors. There we will settle down, and we will never go back to the Hague. Tomorrow we reach Ventimiglia, the last town in Italy before we cross again into France; from there on keep your eyes open for a likely resting place, my dear, and we will find a new home and move in right away."

It was a relief to Jo to find that Han was becoming himself again; she had been disturbed by his silence and his thoughtfulness which she could neither analyze nor explain. Two days later they passed through Mentone, and on the outskirts of the town, in the village of Roquebrune, they discovered the house they were seeking. It stood by itself on a hill, some way from the road; it was a large villa with a garden and at night you could see the lights of San Remo in Italy. Han and Jo bought it impulsively and raced back to Holland to collect their belongings and to start their new life together.

On the way back, they smashed up the car but it didn't matter. "It was insured anyway, and we couldn't afford it," said Han. "We'll need the insurance money and I never did like cars. But quick, the train, and the sooner we get back to Holland the sooner we can leave again!"

Soon Han and Jo moved into their new home and everything was fine. Han felt he would like to stay there

for the rest of his life. After the expense of moving in, there was nothing in the bank; a condition, however, to which Jo had become accustomed. Han set about its rectification with a new spirit which delighted her. She never knew the motive which drove him with such regularity to his studio. But she knew his moods and his temperament well enough to respect without questioning his earnest injunction that, when he was at work, he was to be disturbed by no one under any pretext whatever.

It was thus in the South of France, in the autumn of 1932, that Han began preparations for that series of pictures which was destined, in the years ahead, to enchant and delude the world. He was forty-three years old.

Part Two: 1932-1947

Chapter VI

THE project of discrediting his enemies by painting and selling a faked Old Master had existed at the back of Han's mind for many years. The success which Theo van Wijngaarden had achieved in painting a "Rembrandt" acted as a spur and encouragement. The decision to make the attempt came slowly as Han acquired self-confidence to perform the task and as his bitterness towards the world grew with the continued absence of appreciation for his work in general. The experiments and preparations which preceded the painting of the first forgery lasted for four years. It was in 1932, in the course of his holiday with Jo, that Han decided to make the attempt; he began work on his first fake, the *Disciples at Emmaus*, in 1936. The years between were not exclusively occupied with experiments. It was necessary for Han to earn himself a living. Besides, he always found difficulty in working long and regular hours; and even the stimulus of work which absorbed him could not keep Han continually at a task.

But there was plenty of research work before him; there was any amount of failure before success was achieved.

After buying the villa at Roquebrune, it was necessary for Han and Jo to return to Holland to collect their belongings and to dispose of their home in the Hague. This process involved a stay of several weeks. Han occupied them, between parties with his remaining friends, in the study of those pictures and books to which he might not have access when once he had left the native land of Vermeer. Jo was impressed by the new seriousness and application which her husband was showing, though she deplored the secret way in which he sometimes appeared to go about his business. One day he returned from Amsterdam with a large picture underneath his arm; "What on earth have you there?" she asked at once; for they were not well-off by the standard she would have preferred, and she did not like him to spend money unnecessarily on objects which she did not approve. Han showed her the painting; it represented *The Resurrection of Lazarus* and was unsigned; Jo could recognize in it the work of no known artist; she called on Han to explain his extravagance. "Just an old picture I picked up cheaply at a dealer's in Amsterdam," he said vaguely; "Lovely, don't you think?" Jo examined it for a moment; she had not been married to an art critic for nothing. "Indeed, I *don't* think it's lovely," she said. "I can see no talent in it whatever. Why in the world do you have to go throwing away our money on useless affairs such as that? It's a shame, really."

But Han had been prepared for such an attack, and was totally immune to it. He smiled softly as he placed the canvas among the cases and boxes that were to be transported South. Jo was perfectly right; the picture wasn't the least bit lovely; it was the unknown work of a third-rate artist. But the artist had lived in the seventeenth century, had been a contemporary of Vermeer. All Han wanted was a canvas on which he could paint when his experiments were successful, as he felt sure they would be. Later, the paint on it would be removed. Instead, a Vermeer would begin to take shape. It was on this canvas that his *Emmaus* was painted. It was this ancient canvas, bearing a new design, which was to hang for years in the Boymans Museum at Rotterdam as the pride of their collection.

Whilst on this visit to Holland before moving to his new villa, Han bought other equipment which he knew he would require before long. He knew that Vermeer had used brushes of badger-hair, and that he must find brushes of the same kind. In a Hague book-shop he found two books which interested him: one by Dr. A. W. de Wild on the subject of Vermeer's technique, and the other, "Ueber fette Oele," by Professor Alex Eibner on fats and oils. He bought them in the belief that they would be of value later on. He was tempted to visit his old friend Theo, and to discuss his plans with him; but he decided that it was a risk which he could not take and that he was bound to absolute secrecy.

At last everything was ready for the move. Much had been sent on in advance, and with the rest of the lug-

gage bundled beside them, Han and Jo tumbled into the train for Paris, for Paris and the South, for Paris and the South and their Roquebrune villa, for freedom, for the excitement of their new endeavors! *Vita nuova!*

But there were realities to be faced when they arrived again on the shores of the Mediterranean. It was essential for Han to start right away on earning a livelihood, for after his various expenses there was little left. He was longing to get down to the work of his heart, to the accomplishment of his Vermeer; unfortunately it was necessary for him to earn his living. Once again he found himself doing a twin job; working for his bread and butter by painting and selling pictures, and filling the rest of the day with experiments for his work of art. For the time being, he had more success with the former than with the latter.

For on the French Riviera he commanded a reasonable fee for his portraits. In the fashionable resorts, there is always a changing population; tourists come for a few weeks, go back home again, and their places are taken by others. All of them are well-off, or they could not afford a holiday on the *Côte d'Azur*. Soon after he arrived, Han was commissioned to paint a portrait; it was a success, he was well paid for it by his own standards, and other commissions followed. Jo helped him in many ways. She knew that it was important for him to become popular and well-known among the "right people" in the neighborhood; so she organized parties to which all were invited. She knew that this was a good investment; not only because they themselves received

118]

invitations in return, but also because it was giving him the right contacts for the future. And secretly Jo knew that parties of this kind were necessary to the emotional make-up of a man like Han; that he was never happier than at the center of some such gathering, that however much he loved her he still relied upon admiration from others and on being surrounded by friends. She was sensible, as are few wives, to realize that these things were so, and let nothing restrain her in what she knew very well was in the end to the good of her own relationship with him.

During these years before the war, Han's usual fee for a portrait was in the neighborhood of three hundred dollars. The sum of his success as an orthodox painter cannot, perhaps, be judged by this figure. It is certainly not high by postwar standards in England, and clearly does not place him in anything which approaches the top class. None the less, it is true that he succeeded in establishing for himself a fair reputation even though this fell below that which he believed he deserved. Occasionally he had a stroke of luck and would receive a thousand or so dollars from a rich patron who was pleased with his commission; more often he would be less well rewarded. By painting twenty portraits a year he was able to earn a considerable income. But despite the moderate success which he was achieving, Han had never as much money as he needed—or at least, which is different, as much as he desired. A part of his earnings went by law to An and the children. He had a sister who depended on him for support; and there were Jo's own

children of her first marriage, for whose maintenance Han shared responsibility. It meant that little was available to Han and Jo for their own expenditure—perhaps a third of what he earned after taxes had been paid. For a man in his position, common enough in all conscience, there is sometimes small incentive to earn a few more dollars each week; such a small proportion is available for expenditure; there is only one hope for a betterment of the financial situation, and that is by a sudden and fortuitous capital gain. Han was the kind of man who would gamble on anything if he had half the chance, in that remote hope of winning suddenly an enormous fortune which would relieve him for ever from financial cares. Great efforts of will and the insistence of Jo were required to keep him—except on special occasions—from the casino, where he would have gambled away his earnings each week with regularity.

But there was one indulgence which he allowed himself: he bought a ticket in each *Loterie Nationale*, the great weekly sweepstake which has taken place in France for many years. It was this weekly gamble, with which his family and friends were acquainted, which enabled him to give them an explanation of his wealth later; he told them he had twice won the first prize, which amounts to a variable figure but is about \$60,000. Fantastic, of course, to imagine that one man could win the first prize twice; but if that was what he told his friends, what method had they, even if they doubted him, of checking what he said?

Even if they doubted him . . . for was it an extra-
120]

ordinary thing? It is extraordinary how easily it can happen that those who are closely associated with such an exploit can know nothing whatever of what is going on before them. It is easy to be wise after the event; it is easy to wonder why nothing was suspected over the years, why no questions were asked when Han said for the second time that he had won the first prize. Yet, as a matter of fact, if one's parent, one's husband or a close friend, were suddenly to announce, for the second time in a year, "I have won the first dividend in a football pool"—one would *not* demand evidence in writing; one would *not* ask to see the check from the firm. One would accept what was said without question—so long as the appropriate affluence were evident. And though, when the game was up, Jo must have realized that *that* is what Han was doing on those hundreds of occasions when he shut himself up in his studio, with orders that on no pretext whatever should he be disturbed; although she must have marvelled that she never realized that something strange was going on, or guessed its nature; there was in fact no reason why she should doubt his perfectly natural explanation that he was engaged upon his ordinary work as an artist; especially since often this was in fact the case.

It was unnecessary for Han to make any elaborate preparations to ensure that his activities were kept closely secret. On the pretext of economy, he insisted to Jo that it was impossible to afford any servants in the house; he was not prepared to risk the chance that a maid should stumble into his inner sanctum and dis-

cover a half-finished Vermeer on his easel. Jo would have liked someone to help her, but her own offensive against extravagance made it impossible for her to register any valid objection. One large room was set aside for Han as his holy of holies; Jo knew better than to interrupt him when he was at work there and Han always locked the door securely on leaving. In the studio he could keep all his secret materials safely locked away; and there he carried on his "legitimate" work, which occupied much of his time, and which provided a blind for his secrets. At times, indeed, Jo would be allowed into the studio, when he was working on some orthodox canvas, for which, perhaps, a model would be present; then his chemicals and his strange brushes and his canvas would be hidden away and nothing unusual would appear about the room. "Now I should like to be left alone for some hours, while I finish the picture," Han would say eventually. Jo would withdraw at once; so would the model or friends who had been present; and as soon as they had gone and the door was safely locked, Han would produce the materials on which he was working at the time, and continue his strange researches.

He worked under a strain which he began to find intolerable. He longed to tell everyone of his experiments, to discuss his progress with Theo, to confide in Jo when he had again been stumped, or when he believed that success was at hand. Not a word could he say to anyone—he to whom applause and admiration were essential. Again and again he comforted himself by the prospect of the glory which would be his if he succeeded; and be-

122]

cause he knew that this depended on his silence, he had sufficient strength to confide his work to no one.

For four years the experiments continued. It was a strange existence. Han loved to fill his studio with antiques which belonged to Vermeer's period; he could never pass a dealer's shop without gazing at the window, and often returned with a piece of plate or pottery, an old jug or a picture. Thus, as he worked, he surrounded himself with "contemporary" objects; he immersed himself in the period in which his subject lived, and submerged his personality in the past. This split existence exaggerated the strain under which he worked. He realized its dangers whenever, as Han van Meegeren, he stopped to consider them. All today (he would think) I have believed myself Vermeer; now I am again myself and I can look back upon that time detachedly. But I know very well how much I must control myself; how possible it is to lose my personality, to become crazy with illusions of greatness; to believe myself to be in truth Vermeer, and to end as a crazy imbecile in whose skill none believes but myself. It is not the way it is to be with me!—So tomorrow I will do *nothing*; for a week I will stay away from my studio; and then I will be refreshed, and then I will be sane.

Han's experiments during this period were devoted principally towards discovering a medium which would give him the result which he desired.* He had confidence in his ability to paint a picture with the necessary artistic accomplishment, and he had a sufficient

* See Introduction, page 11 ff.

knowledge of the materials and methods employed by Vermeer. The materials themselves were not difficult to obtain. He believed that he would achieve his end by painting his canvas in the manner of Vermeer, and with the Vermeer pigments, and by then baking the picture in a special oven. Only thus would the paint sufficiently harden; but orthodox media would not stand up to the heat; either they bubbled and blistered, thus ruining the picture at once, or else, as they dried, they discolored the paint. Han experimented with many media and combinations of media, sometimes with encouraging results; but for many months he made no progress at all and it was only after years that he began to get results which showed real hope of success. He discovered that oil of lilacs gave promising indications, a volatile oil which evaporates quickly, and which in drying did not affect his colors; but still he had not produced the appearance of antiquity which he was seeking.

One evening Han picked up the book by Professor Eibner which he had bought in the Hague, found it interesting, and began its careful study. The book dealt with oils of every kind, distinguishing between fat oils, which take long to evaporate, and others which evaporate more easily; it was a comprehensive study of paint of every kind, industrial and domestic as well as artistic. For this reason it went in some detail into the question of paint which could best stand heating; and though it did not provide the formula he was seeking, it gave him new ideas and material which put him on the right track.

For a time Han turned his attention to preparing a canvas. The finished work must be painted on an old canvas, and not only an old one but one of just the right period. For the method of manufacture alters with the centuries and is itself an important clue to the age of the picture—as Han had once learned to his cost. He had returned from England with a picture he had bought cheaply. He had been convinced by the dealer that it was a Pieter de Hooch and he called Theo to his studio to inspect his acquisition. When his friend entered, the picture was standing in a corner with its face towards the wall. “Is that your de Hooch?” he had asked as he entered. “Then I’ll tell you at once, without even seeing it; it’s a fake.” Theo was highly trained; he knew from the back of the canvas, and from a considerable distance, that it belonged to a period later than had been alleged. So it proved upon fuller examination; X-rays showed traces of an earlier painting underneath, and Han’s “de Hooch” turned out to be a modern.

He did not propose to be caught again in the same way. He examined carefully the anonymous painting which he had bought in Amsterdam (*The Resurrection of Lazarus*); he had the assurance of Theo, gained on an invented pretext, that it belonged to the period he required; the 1650’s had been the most likely date, when Vermeer was in his twenties, which suited Han admirably. The canvas itself was in good condition, and it remained to remove from its surface the picture which had adorned it for three centuries. It was of a good size—52 in. x 46 in.—so that he could cut it down later to

smaller dimensions if required. First he removed it from its wooden stretcher, work needing infinite care. It was fastened with tacks, and protected from them by squares of leather, worn and tattered with age. He carefully placed the tacks and leather pieces in a box and hid them away with the stretcher; he knew that they would be required later on, when his work had been completed; in replacing the canvas he must use the same materials. Next he nailed the canvas to a sheet of plywood, and began the removal of the old paint.

A schoolboy removes ink from his fingers with pumice-stone and water. Han used the same method for erasing Lazarus. It was a long job, needing great patience, since as much as possible of the paint must be removed, without causing damage to the canvas. Slowly, as he scrubbed, the old paint came away; it was essential that all should be removed so that if the finished picture were X-rayed there would be no tell-tale traces underneath. But, in the removal of the white, Han found unexpected trouble. It was a lead-paint, specially difficult, by its nature, to remove; and yet it was specially important to do so; for, of its nature, it shows up clearly when subjected to X-rays. Han was again in a quandary. In the end, with all his care and patience, some patches of white paint remained. He dared not attack these further for fear of damaging the canvas; there was only one way out. These white patches which had been parts of a white garment worn by Lazarus in the original picture, would have to remain white in the "Vermeer" which he was to paint on top. In fact, they became part

of the table-cloth spread in front of Christ. Thus the composition of this painting was planned round a considerable area which technical requirements dictated beforehand should be of one particular color.

In the end, as it happened, a patch of white paint remained which Han could neither remove, nor incorporate into the finished picture. This patch—it had been part of a head in *Lazarus*—was the one weakness in *Emmaus*, by which it was possible that its authenticity might have been disproved, or at least doubted. Han painted over it and hoped for the best; it is a little to the right of the head of Christ and a little below it. In an X-ray it can just be distinguished, if the viewer knows just where to look for it; but none looked carefully enough, for it was never observed.

When Han had removed from the canvas as much of the old paint as was safely possible, he nailed it on a new stretcher and set it up on his easel. A canvas was now ready for him, as soon as he was ready for a canvas; and its presence stimulated him to new efforts in his determination to discover the elusive medium which he was seeking—the medium and the manner of baking, which alone (he believed) stood between him and success. Soon afterwards, he began to get more hopeful results. He felt sure that he was on the right track in using lilac oil; the results thus achieved were far the most promising, but the paint would not harden completely since it could not stand sufficient heating. He applied himself to the problem.

He believed he could achieve his end by using chemi-

cals as hardeners. In conjunction with lilac oil as a medium these would themselves evaporate quickly and would hasten and assist the evaporation and drying of the whole. One day, without warning, without presentiment, he hit upon the solution. He was experimenting with phenol and formaldehyde, two chemicals used in the production of bakelite. He had a supply of the most important colors and he mixed the two chemicals in equal proportions, in a separate container. If these were mixed in advance with the paint, as an addition to the medium, they would have dried it with exceptional speed while it was still on the palette; this would have made his task impossible as the paint would become hard and unmanageable before application to the canvas and would have to be mixed often and in very small quantities. Therefore Han worked by dipping his brush first into the chemical mixture and then into the colors on his palette; in this way he painted a meaningless pattern which would serve the purpose of the test.

This canvas, when it was completed, he lowered into the oven, and regulated the temperature to 90°Centi-grade; after fifteen minutes he removed it for inspection and the paint had received no ill effects from the heat. Therefore Han increased the temperature by ten degrees; again the picture emerged intact; at 105° there were still no ill-effects, but at higher temperatures there were the first signs of "frizzling" and he could go no higher. These experiments occupied a whole day; it was now evening, but Han found it impossible to leave his studio. He felt that he had stumbled upon the correct

128]

solution, that here was an end to the years of failure and that soon he could start on the new work of creation. He had discovered a paint which could be safely subjected to a high temperature; it was easily manageable and did not discolor. Working in the same way, he covered another canvas with paint, this time more carefully; he switched on the oven, and brought its temperature at once to the maximum which, he had discovered, the canvas could safely stand. When 105° had been reached, Han lowered the new painting into the oven. Now there was nothing to do but wait; every fifteen minutes he lifted out the painting to inspect it; each time he became more excited by the result. The original colors were being maintained, the paint was growing hard. The picture after half-an-hour had become "dry"; Han left it to bake. After two hours he removed it for final testing. When it had cooled, he applied a little alcohol to one corner of the painting. It had no effect. He dipped a rag in alcohol and scrubbed away at the picture. The alcohol could as well have been water. Han tried other solvents and the baked paint was unaffected. Its color remained throughout as it had been when he completed it.

Soon Han was able for the first time to inspect the picture away from artificial light. He was not disappointed. The colors surpassed his hopes, they were quite unchanged. "I've done it," he said with immense weariness; "I've done it," he believed as he gathered his materials together: "Now I know that I can do anything." Exhausted by the strain and the relief, by the ending of

doubt, the ending of stimulus to continue and the need for sleep, Han collapsed into a chair, closed his eyes and sat still for a while. Though he thought he would sleep he could not; he was trying to guess what the future was bringing, where his discovery would lead him and what should be his plans. As in loneliness he sat in his studio that morning, he knew that he could tell no one, that he must wait for the final triumph when all the years of waiting would be recompensed.

Han felt an infinite need of rest; of going away with Jo for a long holiday, to come back refreshed and ready for new endeavor. He felt as though he had had no sleep for years, as though he had always been as physically exhausted as he found himself at that moment. Over the years, his experiments had gone by fits and starts; when he developed a new idea he would work on it feverishly for a few weeks; when it failed he would become obsessed by the feeling that he would never succeed and then he would do no work at all, perhaps for several weeks. All the time he was working under strains of this kind; and he now felt that without respite he could stand the strain no longer; that he would die if for a few weeks he could not forget everything; he discovered on that brilliant morning that the achievement of success, once the initial exhilaration was over, was equally exhausting as the depression of failure. He went to find Jo, who was up and about early; and she was too wise to inquire the reasons for his absence. She was indeed alarmed by his exhausted appearance; and glad and surprised when he suggested a holiday. "Let us go away for

130]

a long time," he said. "For several months; we both need rest."

It was the summer of 1936; the Olympic Games were taking place in Berlin, and thither Han and Jo went for their holiday. For three months they were away from Roquebrune; and for three months they enjoyed the relief. Han did some sketching, but no real work; he preferred to spend each day in fine relaxation. Jo discovered how pleasant life can be with no duties to perform about the house. Han from time to time remembered his success; it gave him that same glowing and relieved sensation which a man feels who has been penniless all his life and who suddenly and unexpectedly finds he has a bank balance. He decided he was ready to begin work on his Vermeer as soon as his holiday was over; and as he became rested he began to look forward to his return, to feel confident that he would succeed. Towards the end of autumn they returned to their villa; and the day after their arrival Han departed to his studio. "Quite a little job of work in the coming weeks," he had told Jo with a smile which she could not in the least interpret. In his studio he walked to his secret cupboard. At last, at last! He took out the bare canvas which he had prepared the year before; he assembled his brushes, and his paints and chemicals. Carefully, in a marble bowl, he began to mix them. Carefully, he set up the canvas on the easel in the middle of the studio. He selected his brush of badger-hair. Dipping it in the prepared mixture, he began to paint.

Chapter VII

THE painting of *Christ at Emmaus* occupied six months, and for the first time in his life Han was wholly engaged upon work which completely absorbed him. He was fascinated by each day's progress, led on to new ideas, and found new confidence and faith in himself as he made progress. He was astonished at his own perseverance; had his friends known of his exertions, they would have been astonished even more; they only knew that nowadays Han was seldom to be seen in the cafés and bars where he had become an habitué. Everything he possessed, Han put into his work: all his skill, all his knowledge of technique; to succeed was his only ambition, for he dreamt of the day when a van Meegeren would hang in Holland's leading museum, attributed to the greatest artist that Holland had ever known; of the supreme satisfaction of revenge when he could tell those who had accepted his work that it had been painted by himself, by van Meegeren, in his little studio in the South of France. Did he not begin to believe each morn-

ing as he returned after a few hours' sleep to his easel, that already he was as great, as completely an accomplished artist, as the great Vermeer himself? Did he not already identify himself with him?

The picture took shape; it was beginning to come to life. Han found that the figure of Jesus presented the greatest difficulties of the whole composition. He knew that it was the most important part of the picture; the central figure, and therefore that which would attract most attention. Working without a model, Han found it impossibly difficult to produce in the face that appearance of calmness and sublimity which he desired, though he could see in his mind's eye the expression he desired. One morning, as he worked, there came a knock at his door, when he had tried once again to reproduce the face as he wanted it, and as once again he had failed. Normally, perhaps, he would have ignored the knock, would have continued without interruption with his work; today, being for the moment at a standstill, he went to the door to see who was there. It was as though his prayers had been answered. For there in the doorway (Han thought) stood Christ; a figure in rags, yet bearing in his face that serenity which Han had that morning been attempting to reproduce as the central figure of his canvas. It was an Italian beggar who had come to his house for alms; speechless, Han regarded him, and the beggar, not knowing whether to stand his ground or turn on his heels, gazed back steadily into the eyes of Han.

"Dare I?" Han wondered to himself. "Dare I ask him

to come into my studio for the day, can I risk using this heaven-sent gift as a model for the head of Christ? What harm can come of it? This countryman will have no idea of what I am painting: he will know nothing of the technique used; he will visit no gallery where one day this picture will stand, and recognize it as mine, and the face of Jesus as his own. Nobody will ever know . . .”

He turned to his visitor. “So you have come for alms?” he said with a friendly smile. “I believe that perhaps I can help you. Will you come for a while into my house, and we will decide together what we can do for one another.”

The beggar went with Han into the strange studio. He stayed there three days. Then he departed again for the road . . . well fed and clothed for the first time he could remember, and clutching in his hand the wealth of a thousand-franc note. “Tell no one of your visit,” Han told him as he left. “And say nothing of the treatment you have received here, for if others expect to find the same, I am afraid they will be disappointed. But thank you for the help you have given me, my friend; you may be sure I am not quite as crazy as you think, for your services have been invaluable.”

The beggar went on his enlightened way, back to his native land, back to an incredulous family who would never believe that he had slept three blissful nights in a fine feather-bed; nor his story of the strange Dutch artist-fellow who had paid him such untold riches, simply for sitting all day in his studio whilst he dabbled away with paints and brushes. And of course the beggar never kept

his promise, and for several weeks Han was constantly interrupted by wild peasants with a gleam in their eyes, who were dismissed with just the welcome which Han had promised in advance.

Yet he was pleased with his bargain. For behind him the beggar had left the head of Christ which was to be admired by the artists of the world. None knew that this was a forgotten beggar; instead they admired his peace of mind and the suffering of his eyes. None of the beggar's friends or relations ever visited the museum, to marvel that the head of Christ bore a strange resemblance to Francesco—or perhaps it was Antonio or Giuseppe. But now he was hastening back across the border to Ventimiglia, and in his imagination his thousand francs were already converted to an endless vista of *pasta* and *chianti*.

The picture was nearing completion; in the foreground on the table Han painted an antique jug; a white jug of similar design—such as has been made in Delft for centuries—appears in a large number of genuine Vermeers, and Han introduced it in five of his six imitations. He had bought one in Delft for this very purpose; and after his confession it was to be found in the house which he bought later in Nice. It formed a part of the evidence at his trial—evidence against him, if you like; but evidence all the same, as Han had planned it if more were needed, that he was in fact the author of the fakes.

So it happened that, on a fine morning towards the end of that spring of 1937, Han put the final touches to

his picture, and, standing away from it, decided it was completed. And indeed he was satisfied with his work. As he looked at it, he recognized it as the greatest picture he had ever painted; perhaps the greatest he would ever paint. Into it had gone more study, more application and care, than into any of those which pass under his own name. Of the eight fakes which Han was to paint, this one, the first, though of the six "Vermeers" it fetched least, is indisputably the best. The critics must to some extent be forgiven, in this instance at any rate. It is a fine picture; an excellent composition, good colors, perfect technique. It was after all to be acclaimed as "the greatest Vermeer," and Han, as he looked at it, knew that it was great.

And, at that moment, new doubts entered his mind. At that moment, it was his own; it was still unsigned. It would still be possible for him to sell it as his own; to receive the acknowledgment which was due to him as the painter of such a masterpiece. Perhaps some indulgent admirer would offer him a good price for it—\$2,000, perhaps, if he were lucky. It was a temptation, for it was strangely difficult to attribute it to another. But he knew he must be patient; that, soon now, perhaps in a month or two, the moment of his life would come, when he could acknowledge it as his own under the best conditions of all—after it had been accepted as a masterpiece—and then it would be more valuable than ever, to himself and to the world. Quickly in the corner he painted the signature: I. Meer. And now Han prepared for the heating process.

First he varnished the picture, using the same medium as before, but mixed with resin instead of with a pigment. Then he took one last look, before subjecting it to the oven which would perform the work of three centuries. He decided he could do no better; the crucial moment had been reached. And here, indeed, Han stood at the crossroads; here, indeed, all his work might be wasted; in two hours, the accomplishment of months might be wrecked and ruined beyond all repair. Each time he had mixed the paint for *Emmaus*, he had taken care that pigments and medium had been in just those proportions which he had found desirable in his previous experiments. But suppose, on one of those many occasions, he had made the smallest mistake; now it would be revealed for the first time. Suppose, after two hours, the cloth, for example, now a clear white, became yellowed and tarnished, as had so often happened when he began his experiments? If the blues, which now so resembled the clear color which is a Vermeer trade-mark, flaked off or faded under the severe heating to which they must be subjected? Han knew well that the success of all his work was in the balance.

And had he failed at this critical juncture, it is likely that he would have abandoned the whole project; that he could never have brought himself to start all over again, to begin another six months' work which again might fail when the final testing-time arrived; that the discouragement would have been altogether too great for a man so in need of success. It can so often happen, when a great new enterprise is attempted, that a mo-

ment comes when it is essential to have encouragement beyond mere hope; when a severe reverse after months of labor can compel a man to abandon what he planned. For Han, this moment had arrived; he felt that if this were a failure he would never be able to start again. He switched on the oven, waited for it to reach the desired temperature, and then lowered the picture into it. Weary after months of strain, he knew that there was nothing left to do. By his previous calculations, it would be all over in two hours. After an hour he would have a look to see that all was going well; till then he could only wait.

He felt inside him a great relief; a lifting of a burden which had already been weighing upon him too long. "After all," he thought, as he sat and smoked in his studio; "after all, it's decided now, one way or the other; either I have succeeded or else I have failed. In front of me is either the justification of my hopes, and the final revenge for all my humiliations; or else a return to the everyday work of the not-too-prosperous artist who never quite knows when the next commission will arrive. But if the picture is accepted, if I am known as the man who could paint a Vermeer, then we will see how eager they are to buy all I paint—how the prosperous Americans and the fashionable 'set' will flock to my studio to be painted by the new Vermeer. Surely, surely, I will succeed . . ."

So thought Han as he sat and waited; and all the while the paint on *Emmaus* was growing old, was beginning to harden and crack; yet Han could do nothing but

138]

check that the temperature was constant and to look quickly after an hour to make sure that all was well. Han longed to tell everyone of the success he believed to be imminent and yet of the doubts which existed in his mind; of the excitement in his heart, of how the outcome of the work of years lay in the balance for him that day. It was (he almost knew) his necessary weakness—an intimate part of his nature—that he thrived upon the admiration of his friends and of his enemies; that he was happiest above all when he was the center of attraction, the focus of eyes. From this day till his confession, even more than before, this was the constant temptation under which he existed; this abominable secrecy, so essential to his success, and yet so immensely contrary to his nature. For the hundredth time, Han consulted his watch. The crawling minute hand was nearing its target. The moment had come.

The world knows that he found the result for which he had so violently hoped. The canvas which greeted him was soon to be acclaimed as among the greatest pictures that the world has ever known. Han lifted it and carried it with care to the window, regarded it closely in the evening light. He himself marvelled at his work. His previous experiments in the heating process had been carried out with small sketches, completed in a hurry; now for the first time he saw the result in a large canvas carefully prepared. And he himself might surely have been deceived; he would never have guessed that this ancient picture which he held in his hands had been completed that morning in the studio in which he stood.

Yet there was still much work to be done before Han could submit his picture to the authorities. After taking a rest, he examined it carefully, and planned the steps which would now be necessary. At present the picture was too well-preserved; he must induce those cracks and blemishes which had not sufficiently developed in the course of the heating process. For this purpose he removed the canvas from the modern stretcher on which it had been mounted for work hitherto. Then he placed on the table in his studio a metal tube with a diameter of some two feet. To this, working with great care, he brought the painting, and gently rolled it round the tube. It was an operation which required skill and patience since, were he over-impetuous and rolled the canvas too closely about the tube, the hard paint might crack and break more than was required. Gently he went about his work; and as he shaped the canvas to its mould the splits in the paint began to appear. Gradually Han achieved over the whole the impression he desired; and he turned his attention to the next stage in the process.

With the intention of providing evidence that he had in fact painted the picture,* Han sliced a narrow strip of canvas from one side of the picture. It was necessary to cut down the stretcher accordingly, and then to fasten the finished canvas to it, using the same tacks and the same leather patches as before. He worked fast and eagerly, impatient now to reach the moment when all should be completed. At the time when his picture ap-

* See the Introduction, page 19.

peared before the public in the Boymans Museum, it was in a fine condition which was much admired; it was not so when Han first presented it to the world! For weeks before its exhibition, it was in the hands of a skilled restorer. As soon as it had been mounted on its original stretcher, Han filled the cracks in the paint with Indian ink. This apparently drastic treatment had a desired effect; Indian ink, when dry, leaves only minute black particles, almost indistinguishable from the dust which Han knew would have accumulated in the cracks and breaks in the paint during the years since its supposed completion. He waited till the ink was dry—this time without assisting its drying—and then once again he surveyed the result. It was still in too good a condition; he knew that it must appear as though for many years it had been lying forgotten and uncared for in a back room or attic, and that under such treatment it would be damaged to a greater or lesser degree. Han did not wish to be over-dramatic in giving this impression; he did not wish to detract too greatly from its value as a work of art. But working with patience and care he flaked off the paint from unimportant corners of the picture so that sometimes the bare canvas showed through, and, with discretion, he damaged the canvas underneath, as might have happened if for many years it had been unacknowledged.

Now at last his work was completed, and Han examined his canvas with satisfaction. He believed it had but one weakness: the patch of white paint from the original *Lazarus* which he had been unable to remove and had

painted over, but which (he believed) might just be detectable if the picture were X-rayed. Han, naturally, had no such equipment to discover himself beforehand how easily this tell-tale patch could be discerned; but he decided it was a risk worth taking and, at any rate, a risk which he was compelled to take. In the first place the flaw might well escape notice; the paint which he could not move had been a thin coating over a small area. In the second place, it was amorphous: it could not be identified as any particular object; in *Lazarus*, it is true, it had been a head, but in working for its removal Han had altered its outline without, however, obliterating it. Besides, Han felt that it might very well be believed, if it were observed at all, that Vermeer himself had painted it; either that it was part of an under-coat or else that he had painted there some other object which he had later decided to paint over. This single risk, therefore, Han was prepared to take; he knew that his work was over and that there was nothing he could do to improve it.

He took a rest. He locked up his studio with the canvas inside. He went off to the living-room determined to leave it for some days; there was important work to be done, work needing thought and concentration. He must decide how to explain his finding of this priceless treasure. This was a most vital part of the entire project; yet till now he had given it little thought. He sat in the living-room and began to consider; he found that his mind was awlirl. He was obsessed, at first, by an utter loneliness; by the absence of friends, indeed of anyone; he would have been pleased at that

moment if a beggar had knocked at his door. He resisted an impulse to go out into the streets, to find friends he knew and to discuss with them everyday things—he began to analyze, or to attempt to analyze, a strange feeling of unrest behind his usual loneliness. He had lived for months entirely in his studio; such irregular meals as he had found time to prepare he had taken in that room, and he had even slept there so that he need not worry about the rest of the house. Now he had left the studio, and there inside, locked away, was—Christ? Vermeer? The key to his success, his revenge, his future? None of these accurately described his feelings towards the object; this huge and fantastic object which (it now seemed) had filled all his life till then, and which, his only companion, had grown to be a part of him. A part of him . . . Christ, that was *it*! A part of himself, the embodiment of some part of his own nature; *that* was how he felt towards this creation which, though absent from him, he could not dismiss from his mind! It was standing in there, through that door, on its easel; unspeaking yet filled with language, commanding him to act, a tyrant, a king; he was master of himself no more!

But "It is not good to have such thoughts" Han cried. "I am crazed, driven out of my mind, weary and distracted by the strain and the loneliness and the disorderly life I have lived." Han felt he must forget. Oh, for a little while he must forget! It was fearful that he should be possessed of these wild and sinful thoughts; above all else he must remain in control, must be sane, must keep a hold on these fantasies that were rising to enthrall

him. Run! Run! leave the house, seek your friends; return to ordinary, unemotional things; *forget!*

So he left the house, locked the door, and walked; he walked through the streets of the town, and from time to time he would greet one of his friends as he passed—"B'jour, Jean-Marie," "B'jour, mon ami"—and he felt fine. And at length he discovered himself at his favorite café, and the *patron*, delighted to recover a good customer, gave him a fine welcome, and he had an absinthe and his head began to grow clear. "A go-between," he thought; "that is what I must find, a go-between. Clearly I cannot myself present *Emmaus* for authentication; they do not like me, any of these fellows, they will be suspicious at once if they know that the painting has connections with van Meegeren, they know that I have made mistakes before, unwittingly in truth, in my purchases of Old Masters—remember the de Hooch!—and they will look very carefully at anything connected with me. But then, the go-between; I can entrust the true story to nobody, not even to him; start again from the beginning now, what is to be said?"

Friends came and sat at his table, and they all had a drink, and then they had another, and the company and the absinthe cleared Han's mind, till: "Heavens, I was rusty in the head!" he thought to himself. "Only just saved myself, must have been just about crazy." He had become good company, was laughing and singing, but he was pondering all the time. He must discover an intermediary who could be trusted—perhaps Theo? perhaps Jo?—but *they* would guess the truth, and if the

144]

truth be told . . . It was late, he could no longer think clearly, his evening began to have a contrary effect: where before it made all clear, it was beginning now to blunt his intelligence.

In the morning he again considered his problem. He worked out and discarded many possible schemes. He was fully aware of the size of his problem. If his picture were accepted as a Vermeer, it would awaken interest all over the world. Vermeer's work had never been more admired, everyone would be eager to see the new picture, so unexpectedly added to the small number in existence. Everyone would have his own theory about when it was painted, and where—and by whom, for surely there would be doubters among them. And all would be anxious to know how such a magnificent painting could have been unknown and unrecorded during the years since its completion.

By evening, Han was decided. He took a train to Paris; in the compartment with him was a small case, containing his personal belongings, and a picture, protected by brown paper from prying eyes. Arrived in Paris after the long journey he went at once to a bank, where he deposited the picture for safe keeping. The receipt in his pocket, he sought out a solicitor—one whom he had met before and whom he believed he could trust. He was welcomed, took a seat and began to unfold the remarkable story he had invented.

"We penniless artists can seldom earn our living by painting," he began when preliminaries were completed; "and you know that from time to time I make

something on the side by buying pictures when I can find them cheaply, and selling them in the best market at the most favorable time. I believe I have had a real stroke of luck—the kind of luck which anyone in my position dreams about. I need your help, for the repercussions may be international.”

He paused, to observe the effect of what he was saying. His solicitor friend was attentive, credulous, unsuspicious; professionally competent, a businessman listening to a client. So far, all went well. Han came at once to the point.

“I believe I have discovered a new Vermeer—a magnificent canvas, too, in good condition, which will attract violent attention in every artistic center. Never mind what I paid for it, that is of no importance, but I will make a fine profit if others, too, believe it is a Vermeer. I believe I could sell it for between one hundred fifty and three hundred thousand dollars.”

And at this the solicitor woke up. To tell the truth, he had no more than the layman's knowledge of artistic matters, had heard of Vermeer without any knowledge of his value or his reputation, had thought this would be an ordinary business matter involving a few thousand francs, was not unusually interested. Three hundred thousand dollars! His head was already awl with percentages.

“Now I dare say you wonder why I have come to you,” Han continued slowly, as though six-figure transactions were an everyday occurrence. “And indeed I should prefer to do the entire transaction myself, for of

146]

course your commission will be a large one—" ("Far wiser to place the matter in our hands, M. van Mee-geren" interposed the solicitor)—"but if the truth be told I have little choice in the matter, if I am to keep my side of a bargain.

"A rich French family has fallen on evil days. It is tragic how often this happens nowadays—so many were hit by the depression—and I hate to see the breakup of large estates. But they are proud, the old French families, and hate their poverty to be known; they will sell their treasures to pay a mortgage or an overdraft, so long as it can be done without the publicity they detest. It is easy to understand; and how difficult it is to help them, when so often the value is less than was expected, the antique silver so often an imitation, exchanged for an imitation by some dishonest steward, or some disgruntled younger son, at some far-off period in its history.

"But one such family" (Han continued) "I believe to have been fortunate. Hearing they intended to dispose of certain pictures, I paid them a visit; I was interested for a special reason. Towards the end of the last century, the head of the family, a Parisian lawyer, married a rich young lady from Delft, which, as you know, is the birthplace of Vermeer. She brought as her dowry a collection of old paintings, which became her family's pride. I have a special knowledge of Dutch pictures, and when I heard that these might come under the hammer, I wanted to get a look at them at the first opportunity."

The solicitor was attentive, absorbed, silent. A Parisian lawyer who married a girl from Delft? Yes, of course, it all made sense. He believed he could even remember (if he thought about it afterwards) the name of the family concerned. He was eager to hear more; Han soon continued.

"I had a look at these pictures and of course I was disappointed. Family portraits as usual, of doubtful origin; the Rembrandt, displayed as such for centuries, and clearly an imitation; all the usual disillusionment. After I had seen their star attractions, I was about to leave; then, hidden away in a cupboard, among boxes and junk, I discovered almost by chance the picture I am talking about—not even hung, not even on display, forgotten and ignored. I saw it, I admired it, I examined it minutely; and I'll stake my reputation it's by Jan Vermeer of Delft, painted probably in the middle of the seventeenth century, and worth a fortune.

"And now I have to explain," Han went on, "why I have come to you for assistance. I bought this picture—in Paris, yesterday—and am anxious to dispose of it. You may or may not know that I am unpopular with the experts, to whom it must now be submitted for authentication. For years I have waged a losing battle against their ignorance and their incompetence, and anything they associate with me they may regard with suspicion. I wouldn't put it past them to suggest I'd painted it myself—just to spite them, you know! So I do not want my name to be mentioned in the transaction. You can say that you are acting on behalf of the family from
148]

whom I bought the picture; you can say, indeed, anything you like, providing it is accurate and in accordance with the facts. I do not want to be associated, my friend, with anything that is not strictly honest; it would be a risk, you understand, which a man in my position cannot afford to take."

This was not a proposition which any solicitor was likely to refuse. He had been turning it over swiftly in his mind, considering it in all its aspects; clearly he himself had nothing to lose, even if the picture which this fellow had discovered turned out to be an imitation, and was of no value whatever; he would still receive a fee for his work in its negotiation. And if, as he believed—for he was infected with Han's confidence—the picture were in fact a Vermeer, how much he would gain through his part in the affair! "You need not worry, I will handle the matter completely," he told Han at once. "Your name will not be mentioned and I will do all I can to help you. Now tell me, which is the family from whom you bought it? I should know their name for reference purposes."

Han had been prepared for this. "I am bound by secrecy," he replied at once. "It was a condition of the sale that I should reveal the name to no one. They are especially desirous that none should know that such an old and respected family is being compelled by circumstances to part with their heirlooms. And that is what you must say, when the question is raised; it is a handicap, I know, but it's a necessary condition."

His solicitor did not feel disturbed. Really it would

make little difference as far as he was concerned; and if he desired any additional check he felt confident that with a little research work he would be able to identify those involved. But as a matter of fact, though he made some enquiries later, he never did discover the name of the prosperous French lawyer who had married, in the eighteen-sixties, a certain young lady from Delft; and he soon abandoned the search as being anyway unimportant.

So it was agreed between them; and when Han found that the great Dr. Bredius was interested, he suggested that the canvas should be submitted to him. This was arranged and the picture was collected by the solicitor from the vault where it had been deposited and taken by him to the great man. Next day, it was a Vermeer. Dr. Bredius had decided.

As already related * the *Emmaus* was sold to the Boymans Museum in Amsterdam for \$174,000, through the agency of D. A. Hoogendijk, an Amsterdam dealer who was to interest himself in others of the forgeries which were to follow. Han's share was in the neighborhood of \$120,000; he was 48 years old and well-off for the first time he could remember.

* See Introduction, page 18.

Chapter VIII

BEFORE it was exhibited to the general public in the Boymans Museum, Han's picture was sent to a restorer who repaired all the damage which had intentionally been done by its creator. The bare patches were skillfully painted over; the painting itself was "backed" and strengthened with a new lining. This delicate operation is commonly performed if the original canvas of a valuable picture is in poor condition. The paint clings together so firmly when the whole is pasted face downwards to a sheet of paper, which helps its cohesion, that the old canvas can be removed and a new one glued to the paint. The colors of the picture were carefully touched up; it was magnificently framed. Then it was hung in the most conspicuous position, and roped off so that over-eager admirers should not come too close. A special little carpet was placed in front, for the comfort of spectators. The museum opened its doors to an eager and enthusiastic public.

Shortly afterwards, there came a visitor to the mu-

seum, inconspicuous and hardly noticed: small in stature, shoulders slightly stooping, hair brushed back and already greying; a face of humor and intelligence, young sometimes, almost boyish, more often old, when shadows showed wrinkles; a cigarette always in his mouth or nervously in his fingers, unspeaking, nodding from time to time to visitors he knew; moving through the crowd, for all the world like a little grey mouse, to fidget for position among those who jostled in front of the new acquisition. "Excuse me, excuse me," and he was there; he was there, standing in front of the picture, looking at it from the outside, completely detached and devoid of personality, objective, critical, intent.

For a while, Han had no thoughts at all, he made his mind empty, he refused to indulge in any triumph or relief. "I'll go along like anyone else," he had said to himself that morning. "I'll have a look at the new Vermeer." Here he was, trying earnestly to believe he had never seen it before, that he was unconcerned with it, that he was viewing it independently, trying to judge it for himself. "It's certainly a fine composition," he thought. "The colors are right, and so is the brushwork. Strange that the subject should be religious; I've never seen a Vermeer with a subject of that kind. But then there's the one in Scotland of which I've heard tell; he could very likely have painted this one at the same time and that would account for it." So they would all be thinking as they gazed in admiration at his work; and indeed Han, as he gazed beside them, found it hard to think differently, so long as he was able in his own mind

to dissociate himself from it. "It is as good as a Vermeer," he thought passionately. "It is indistinguishable. By gaining its acceptance I have done nothing to discredit the judgment of those who are deceived. I have only made nonsense of all of them, who have said for years that I could not paint, that all my work was trash, who were unable in passing judgment to distinguish my serious work from the rest, who forgot my genius when they regarded my frivolities." That the work of the despised van Meegeren should be accepted as a Vermeer! It was indeed a triumph!

The despised van Meegeren; for it was thus, without doubt, that he regarded himself. How much justification had he for such a belief? His reason for holding it, more than anything else, was that he never remembered success; if he were criticized he could never forget it. He had, in fact, achieved considerable success under his own name; such opposition as he received from the critics was as much for his barbed pen as for his erratic brush. His vanity was his enemy; he believed he was without a peer, that he should be so acknowledged; nothing less would satisfy him, he was the greatest painter of his year. Yet this was an opinion which he alone held. Not even his closest friend would put him in the front rank; how then was he able to produce the *Emmaus*? One answer is that it was without doubt his finest work; had occupied more time, more concentration and attention, than anything else he had accomplished till then. He was so determined to succeed that he created new inspiration for himself, never before at-

tained; for the first time, he *was* in the front rank, he had produced something great; he never again produced a comparable work. But he himself would not admit this was the case; judgment of the world seemed fallible, when in part it can be justified. Han could no longer forget, as he looked at the picture that morning, that it was his own work; "They've certainly made a fine job of the restoring," he thought. "It's almost as good as when I first painted it." Curse this ridiculous barrier which stops a man from having a decent look! He leaned forward to examine in detail one part of the picture; and at once an attendant motioned him back. Han laughed. What fools they are!

It was hailed sensationally, it was the artistic event of the year, of the century; it awoke more praise, more argument and controversy than ever Han expected. "And it was so simple," he thought aloud afterwards. "Really, now it's over and done with, nothing could have been easier. Like everything else, there was the groundwork to be done; once that was over and the solution found, there was nothing in it." He was accustomed by now to thinking aloud, to saying words to himself which he desired to tell the world. And now that the picture was accepted, why *shouldn't* he tell the world? Had not the moment come which he had so long awaited? Why should he not go now, this instant, his evidence in his hands, to reap his revenge?

"You have valued this picture at almost \$200,000; it was painted by me—by van Meegeren whose work you

have despised; the picture is unchanged now you know who painted it; very well, is its value the same?"

"Not yet, not yet!" said a voice inside him. "Enjoy a little longer this infinite self-torture! Wait a little longer till success is assured!—Yet how easily they have been convinced—convinced as *I* intended! And anyone could do it—anyone who was determined; I should be quite untroubled to paint another; I should be quite untroubled to do the same thing a second time. . . ."

These were fatal thoughts which revolved inside his mind. "Why not paint another?" he began to think, and then there would be double evidence; if they refused to believe one picture were his, the evidence of another would surely convince them. And the money he had received! How delightful to spend it, the money of his dupes! When he confessed would it all be lost? What charges could be brought? It was not *he* who had declared it a Vermeer; he was incompetent to do so!

Thus there was an astonishing conflict in his mind. Two strong passions drove him in opposite directions; his nature was inconsistent, unable to accommodate both needs. He was eager through all this time to achieve his triumph, but feared that something might have been forgotten, that if he attempted now to reap his reward, he might be cheated by his own eagerness. Instead he did nothing, just what one might expect of a man of sensibility who cannot make up his mind; who is over-intelligent, seeing too clearly the pros and cons, analyzing, debating over and over again, trying to decide which is the better course. He was driven by his

nature to tell the world, now, this instant, to seize with both hands his revenge, to glory in it. Suppose they say I am mad? Suppose they say my evidence is insufficient? Suppose I have forgotten something, that there is something I hadn't bargained for? Suppose! Suppose! And Han felt sure (like one who cannot choose between two lovers) that if he waited just a little longer, *something* would happen to decide him, *something* would enable him to make up his mind. And in the meantime—why should it be denied?—he found it was delightful to possess all the money he desired, to be able to afford—how could it be avoided?—some of the luxuries he had always been denied.

But what should he do with his tens of thousands? Should he just go ahead and blue the lot, and then discreetly vanish, leaving behind him letters to solicitors, and all the evidence, and enjoy his grand moment in absence—but in riches? It was a terrible temptation—it was enough to keep him for the rest of his life. Yet how greatly it would detract from his delight—to read of his admissions in the papers, a nine-day wonder soon forgotten, never able to confront his enemies and to say "You fools!" If he admitted openly it was his work, what chance would he have of keeping his fortune? He could ask legal advice from no one. Would they prefer a charge of false pretenses? If he returned the money to the buyers, how much would the painting be worth then? Fifteen thousand? The old argument again.

"It's worth what they paid for it," he said. "That is the only way a price can be established. And that is its
156]

value—whether it was painted by me or by Vermeer. I am defrauding no one!”

But the money slipped away in an alarming fashion. Of course it was impossible not to spend a bit on celebrations and on presents for Jo and the children. Soon he had spent five thousand. New fears began to attack him. Suppose the money were lost or stolen? Suppose I put it in securities which went bust? Then if I had to repay it later on, I'd be properly in the soup, and no way of getting out. He decided to buy a house. It was the safest investment possible, and it could be in a more pleasant and fashionable part of the South Coast, Cannes perhaps, or Nice. There he would live for a year or so while he rested and did some orthodox painting and decided about the future; he could sell the Roquebrune villa, his restless spirit was already anxious to move on, was tired of the associations with Roquebrune, with all the strain and the weariness. He need invent no elaborate pretext for his new found wealth. He could almost tell the truth. “We are rich for ever,” he would tell Jo. “Our dreams have come true. I picked up a Vermeer for next to nothing; it's been sold for almost two hundred thousand. We'll buy a new home and all that we desire; there is no need for us to worry any more.”

And in Nice Han discovered an enormous and amazing house; a kind of palace, with marble stairs and huge rooms, the house a king might own, exactly as he required. He bought it impulsively as he had bought the Roquebrune villa, and towards the middle of 1938 he

and Jo moved in with all their belongings: furniture and antiques, Han's own paints and drawings; they bought more besides till the house was crowded with beautiful and ancient things. "In a year's time, when I confess, this will be all ended," Han thought to himself. "I cannot yet admit that none of this is ours, that before long it must all be sold again. Let us make the most of this year at our disposal; it will always be remembered as the best year of all."

They lived a gay and uneventful life which they enjoyed immensely. During the year which they were to spend at Nice, Han never succeeded in reaching a definite decision, to spend the money or to save it; it was too difficult, altogether beyond him; it just dribbled away and after a while he stopped worrying. How could a man of Han's temperament do otherwise? How could he resist the temptation? At times he was able to summon strength and energy; now that he was wealthy, his old resolutions faded; to possess such wealth seemed in part to be his revenge. But he had brought from Roquebrune the materials he had assembled, and sooner or later he would use them again. It would become a fascinating hobby, a study in itself, a kind of game which would absorb him intensely; he began to look forward to new experiments, to see if his technique could be improved, to attempt an imitation of other painters. "Why should I stop at a Vermeer?" he asked himself. "I will show that the work of his contemporaries can be reproduced as well." Han was already well-acquainted with the methods and techniques of de Hooch

158]

and Frans Hals: he set himself the task of copying their work. In the twelve months which followed, he produced six new forgeries.

It seems probable that of these Han had no intention of placing on the market any except the two "de Hoochs." The others—a "Hals," a "Terborch," and two "Vermeers"—he probably believed were below the necessary standard; he looked upon them only as experiments in his subject; they are far less competent than the *Emmaus*. In any case, he never attempted to sell them: he left them behind in Nice on the outbreak of war and they were discovered in his villa soon after his confession. The two "de Hoochs" have a different story. With them, Han had taken great care; on their completion he regarded them with satisfaction; he believed they were typical of the work of the painter, who is now less fashionable than Vermeer but whose reputation at one time was higher. The two paintings represent two interiors; one is of a *Drinking Party*, the other a group of *Card-Players*; to give the impression of age, Han used the same methods he had employed in the *Emmaus*. It was simply a question of painting in a different style; and in accomplishing this Han found little difficulty. These two paintings are of smaller interest than the "Vermeers"; they fetched a smaller price and were less widely admired; no elaborate certification was apparently thought necessary. They were sold to two Rotterdam collectors, Mr. D. G. van Beuningen and Mr. W van der Vorm, who were to interest themselves also in the later "Vermeers." The price paid for the two paint-

ings was \$204,000; there is no certain record of the commission retained by agents and go-betweens; but it is likely that the two pictures earned Han about as much again as he had been paid for the *Emmaus*.

It is sometimes said that the eight fakes which Han admitted as his own were not the only ones he succeeded in selling; that still there are van Meegerens passing as Old Masters; "Probably a van Meegeren" has become an artistic catch-phrase if the credentials of a newly-discovered painting are brought into doubt. But it seems unlikely that this should be the case. Had he painted and sold others, at this time or later, there is no apparent reason why he should have kept them secret. For one already bankrupt, there is no reason for avoiding fresh liabilities. He would surely have preferred to take credit for as much as possible; he would be more likely to claim pictures as his own which he had never painted, than to keep silent about others, for which credit could be his. At no time did he mention the existence of other forgeries, even to his son; with a solitary exception which remains a mystery.

For when he was dying, Han called his son to his bedside and told him of a ninth forgery which he had painted and hidden. The forgery is a "Vermeer" and probably it was painted during this period. In the few minutes of privacy allowed, Han did not have time to tell his son where the picture was hidden. Its hiding place is unknown and it has never yet been found. Since this picture alone was carefully hidden, it is perhaps an indication that Han planned to sell it at a later date,

160]

in more stable international conditions; but this is inevitably guesswork. It was August, 1939 and the fear of war overruled all other considerations.

Han was suddenly stricken by panic. The balance of his fortune was in Dutch banknotes; anything might happen if he were marooned in France with a fortune in foreign currency; perhaps he would be unable to return to Holland, or would be delayed in so doing; he did not wish to return to Holland, for he enjoyed his leisured life in the South of France and had made many friends amongst people of all classes who took his fancy. He was interested in no one he had left behind in Holland; but there was less risk that Holland should be involved in a war than France; by returning he stood a better chance of avoiding a conflict he had no desire to share.

He soon decided that that would be his wiser choice. Having made up his mind, he left without delay. He and Jo took no possessions with them; they locked up the house and went empty-handed to Amsterdam. Furniture was left under dust-sheets; no caretaker, no precautions, nothing. The canvases on which Han had been working were abandoned: his experiments in forgery, the "Hals," the "Vermeers," and the rest; he did not even take with him the evidence he had kept that the *Emmaus* was his; the strip of canvas, the pieces cut from the stretcher when he altered its size; all these were left behind, though carefully hidden away. Either Han did not believe that there was to be a long war, that the international situation was bad, but would soon blow

over, that it was better to clear out in case it came to blows, but was not worth the trouble of moving lock, stock and barrel; or else he was afraid of taking all through the customs at such a difficult time. In any case, all was left behind; at the end of August Han and Jo arrived in Amsterdam with nothing but the clothes they stood up in and the balance of the money he had received for his picture. "Soon we will be back again," Han told Jo, and hoped he spoke with conviction. "We have been wise to leave our home for a little while, but we will be able to go back and I hope it will be soon."

So spake Han on the eve of war. But he and Jo never returned to France, and they never again saw their palatial residence on the *Côte d'Azur*.

Chapter IX

IN AUGUST, 1939, Han and Jo arrived in Amsterdam, and expected that the international crisis would soon blow over and that they would soon be able to return to Nice. They took rooms in an hotel and awaited events. A week after their arrival, Hitler invaded Poland.

The course of each man's life was at once altered. Han soon realized that it would be many months, and perhaps years, before he could return to his newly-found home where he had left the evidence that he had painted *Emmaus*. He did not take long to reconcile himself to the unpleasant facts of war; he believed that Holland might well remain neutral and at any rate he had no intention of playing an active part. He was fifty years old and he had never been physically strong; besides, he felt no patriotic impulses, toward his own country or towards any other. It was a great inconvenience that so much of his property, and all the materials he had acquired for forgery, should be abandoned in a

country at war; but that could not be helped and they would await the return of peace. Han hoped that, as far as possible, the war would pass him by; he began to look for a suitable house near Amsterdam, perhaps on the outskirts of the city, where he might be reasonably comfortable and unaffected by international affairs. Han had little trouble in finding what he wanted, and leased a furnished house in the village of Laren which was quiet and secluded and offered the peace which he desired. Here Han and Jo moved at the start of 1940; but in the spring the phony war ended.

At once the world was again changed for Han and his countrymen. German troops swept through the country, there were a few days of heroism with fearful air attacks and spasmodic resistance; then came Dunkirk, and Hitler ruled Europe. All happened so suddenly that it seemed to have ended before it had begun; the Dutch people was enslaved. From that moment till the Liberation, for five long years, deception and deceit became the order of the day.

In England we have experienced nothing of this kind—or nothing to compare with its scale. We have not known the demoralizing effect of the forces of occupation. Whatever black markets have arisen have been insignificant when compared with those on the Continent. This is due to no inherent honesty on the part of our citizens, nor to any particular genius on the part of a government in framing legislation or ensuring that it is effective. It is principally due to this fact, that we were never occupied; once it has become a duty to sab-

164]

otage and to kill secretly, to lie and to deceive, it becomes automatic that transactions should be underground and that there should be a general falling-off in the standards of a community. A man who is hungry will go to any lengths to obtain bread. There are shortages and there are those with money; men who possess the goods which are in short supply will seek to sell in the best market; if controls are imposed by a foreign power they will seek all means for their circumvention.

Han's finances, which in the years ahead were to run completely wild, were by 1940 absolutely out of hand. He had spent thousands on an enormous palace, the other side of Europe; it was impossible to convert this property to wealth, and bring the cash to Holland, till the war ended. But in addition he had used, on lavish personal expenditure, a frightening proportion of all he had received; he was beginning to know that it could never be repaid. Even if it could, this was not at all the moment that Han would have chosen to reveal his secret, when his evidence and the incriminating materials (if so they may be called) were hundreds of miles away, and when the attention of the world was diverted from artistic affairs. He was unable to face the decisions which he knew he must one day make; he simply could not bring himself to consider them. He had a vague idea of writing a long confession and hiding it with his will, to be discovered after his death and revealed to an amazed public. But he knew that this offered no real solution; that he was completely uninterested in anything which might happen after his death, that such a

prospect of revenge was entirely illusory. He was never able to bring himself to the task; days went by and Han did nothing.

It was not long, however, before he began to experiment again. By his Roquebrune discoveries he had found a kind of work which fascinated him, which he enjoyed and at which he excelled beyond any other, which he knew in his heart he was longing to continue; which provided full scope for all his talents, as well as enabling him to laugh at the world which had ignored him. As soon as he had settled down in his Laren villa, he began to collect together a new supply of the materials he had used: he bought in Amsterdam a number of old canvases, and he assembled again the pigments, the oils and the chemicals. He built a new oven of a less crude design, now that he knew exactly what he wanted beforehand. Probably in the spring of 1940, he began to paint again; and from then he continued, almost without a break, until the war ended. He never stopped to think, he never wondered where his work was leading him; he went on from one success to another, unconcerned by any fears of the consequences, confident that he would never be exposed; slowly over the whole period from 1937 his purpose had changed, till soon he had forgotten his true ambition; as soon as one painting was completed he began work on another; he was entirely absorbed and intrigued by his work, and the thought never entered his head that his secret would be discovered. And as he progressed from one picture to another, his standard fell as his self-confidence grew;

he took less and less trouble, artistically and technically, convinced that each forgery would be accepted like those which had gone before.

The five remaining forgeries were in the style of Vermeer and he again chose biblical subjects, following the argument which he had previously used. He planned that it should be supposed that this series of paintings was made by Vermeer soon after his *Christ with Martha and Mary* and in the same period as his *Christ at Emmaus*; what could be more reasonable (granting the authorship of these two paintings) than that Vermeer should have painted other religious pictures, during the middle period of his life, of which so little is known? And (he thought) if he painted religious pictures, what more probable than that one should be the *Last Supper*? This therefore was the subject which Han now set himself, and he took great care in its completion. Indeed, the painting of this forgery provides an example, not only of the attention which he gave to the subject, but also of his audacity and self-confidence when it was completed. For having started work on the canvas, which was to occupy him for several months, Han decided that he was out of practice and unable to do justice to himself; he was having difficulty with the figures and in particular with the head of Christ. Before continuing, he determined to make a number of sketches, copies of earlier studies, so that he could succeed in gaining as fine a result as had been possible in *Emmaus*. When these were completed to his satisfaction, he made a detailed painting of Christ's head, using the

paints which he would ultimately use, to give himself full confidence that in the final picture this head should be exactly as he required it. When this study was completed to his satisfaction, he determined to test the new oven, and the final stages of the process; to ensure that none of his skill had been lost, he took this study of the head of Christ through the entire process. When it was completed he was satisfied with it, and decided it would be a pity if the time should be wasted which he had spent in its production. He therefore sold it as a preliminary study by Vermeer of the *Head of Christ* for an unknown painting; and a few months later produced the unknown painting, which was of course his own *Last Supper*, by now completed. The *Head of Christ* and the *Last Supper* were sold in 1940 for the unbelievable total of \$645,000—their sale is discussed later in this chapter—and Han was once again so opulent that money for him ceased to have any significance.

Yet it is a remarkable fact that the *Last Supper* was painted on a canvas which was bought by Han in the spring of 1940 from the Amsterdam dealer Douwes; it bore a picture by the little-known painter Hondius who had lived in the seventeenth century at the same time as Vermeer; the picture represented a hunting scene, two horses with their riders standing by, their dogs and the birds they had killed. It was a bad painting and Han of course was interested in its subject not at all, buying it only that he himself might use the canvas. But by now he was so confident of success that he

168]

hardly bothered to remove the old paint from the canvas before painting his own picture; he simply painted over it, and the original picture can still be discerned underneath. Now it is clear that Vermeer would never have painted over another picture by a different artist, and it is therefore evident that it can only have been subjected to the most cursory examination at the time of its sale and before every transaction in which it was involved.

Han decided that part of his receipts must be invested in goods which would maintain their value, though the expenditure of all of it in this way would attract attention to his wealth which must to some extent be kept secret. He also believed that the time had come when he should live in a house of his own, since under the present arrangement he might be required to leave by his landlord at short notice, perhaps when a Vermeer was nearing completion. Fortunately, both problems could be solved in the same way; and at the beginning of 1941 he began buying houses in which the greater part of his wealth was to be invested. By the end of the war, he had bought over fifty, in Laren and Amsterdam; into one of these, on the outskirts of Laren, he moved with Jo; while tenants in the others, as he acquired them, provided a steady and growing income. His new home was a large and rambling house with its own gardens and grounds, with a strange upward-sloping roof and large rooms with oak beams; Han at once began work on converting one of them into a

studio and this was again set aside as an inner sanctum where he could work without fear of interruption. For a time he was fully occupied in managing his financial affairs and setting in order his new house; in buying new furniture and ornaments and in assembling in his studio the materials of his trade. Towards the end of 1941, he began to paint again; and within eighteen months had completed his last three pictures.

These were increasingly carelessly done. If any one of them had been painted before the war, it would have stood little chance of acceptance. First came his representation of *Isaac Blessing Jacob*; this was soon followed by the *Washing of Christ's Feet*; at the end of 1942 he began work on *Christ and the Adulteress* which was finished by the spring of the following year. It is hard to understand how any could believe that such a number of Vermeers should suddenly be discovered in such a brief period. It would be less remarkable if each had been sold through a different go-between, unsuspecting that each might have sprung from the same origin; but in fact this was not the case. The dealer Hoogendijk who had already been associated with the *Emmaus* and a de Hooch, dealt also with the *Last Supper* and its study of *Christ's Head*; *Isaac Blessing Jacob* also passed through his hands. Another Amsterdam agent, R. Strijbis, was concerned altogether with four of the paintings. No suspicions were aroused.

And before any attempt can be made to give a reliable account of the negotiations in the case of each picture, of the sums paid, the stories told, and the per-
170]

sonalities involved, it is necessary to emphasize the essential unreliability of the evidence, owing to the conditions of occupation and Han's own nature, which led him to tell a different story on every possible occasion, both at this time and in the years after his confession; partly owing to a lively imagination which led him to alter and embroider the facts, and partly owing to a conscious desire to make his story so complex and contradictory that none should be able to unravel it. He intentionally wove a fabric of lies, of misstatements and misleading statements, which has never been untangled and now never will be; he told a different story to every hearer and it cannot be guessed which one of these—if any—is the true one. He planned that if ever his work were discovered, or suspicion aroused, the investigator would find only a series of dead ends, contradictory statements, dissatisfaction. Even after his confession, when he knew that his conviction was assured—when, in fact, he was working above all, not to prove his innocence but to secure the conviction which would also justify him—he continued to lay the trail of deception, as much from habit and a strange humor as from any planned or constructive reason. He became totally irresponsible, totally uncaring for the world and its opinions, a man who believed only in himself and who cared only for his own tattered destiny. Deception absorbed him; after all, it was his trade. In telling the story of his achievements to eager listeners before and after his trial, he would begin, perhaps, with an accurate account; then, perhaps unintentionally, he would

embroider and invent, adding those things that might have happened or which nearly happened; till by the end of the evening he almost believed that they had happened in fact. Next day, before a different audience, a different story would be told; how is it possible to separate one from another?

To these difficulties, the general conditions of life were a contributory factor. Every transaction was performed under conditions of secrecy. There was a constant fear that the Germans might hear of the existence of these pictures, that thus national treasures might be lost which would be a national tragedy even if they were paid for—which in other cases was the exception rather than the rule. To the sentimental Dutch this was a real consideration which outweighed many others in importance; was it not when an outraged official found a "Vermeer"—the *Adultrous*—among Goering's collection in Salzburg that enquiries began the *dénouement*? Moreover it was impossible to travel at will; therefore it was impossible to verify stories; if Han alleged that the painting had been discovered in Italy or in the South of France, it was impossible for private individuals to go there in person and to investigate in detail the circumstances of the sale or discovery. But the astonishing fact is that in many cases no questions were asked about the past history of a supposed Vermeer which was imagined to have been in existence for a matter of three centuries.

For the same reasons, the financial affairs are contradictory and sometimes obscure; partly because there are

no official records and partly because, in narrating his account of transactions, each individual finds it in his interest to exaggerate or to minimize the amounts paid or received. There was nothing in writing, no receipts and no contracts. If Han received a million guilders for a painting, he received simply a thousand thousand-guilder notes; there were no checks and there were no bank deposits. Now that there is a scramble for what remains of Han's fortune, the authorities find that they are in an impossible position; since it can never be discovered from any written evidence, or from any tax returns, how much was involved in each of the many transactions. Those who bought the pictures are naturally inclined to over-emphasize the amounts that they paid, since their share of what remains will be proportionately greater; on the other hand they are likely to discredit the claims of others, proposing that these are not the true figures; it is not surprising that any number of lawsuits is imminent and that there are divergent estimates of the amount paid by each of the intermediaries and by each final purchaser in the majority of cases. Han himself, after his confession, had no particular interest in the figures alleged, one way or the other; he knew that he owed so much money to so many claimants that he had not the least prospect of repaying them in full.

For the claimants say that they paid the impressive total of some \$2,289,000 for the eight pictures. The principal private claimant is the Rotterdam collector Mr. D. G. van Beuningen, who has already been men-

tioned as the purchaser of a "de Hooch"; for this picture he paid an approximate figure of \$117,000, which is reasonable when compared with later prices. Van Beuningen also bought the two "Vermeers" painted in 1940; the *Last Supper* and the *Head of Christ*, its study. In both cases van Meegeren approached the agent Strijbis with the announcement that he had discovered a new masterpiece; at the time of the trial Strijbis was to inform the Court that van Meegeren "did not tell him" where the pictures had been found; this did not discourage him from offering to negotiate their sale. Both pictures he took to the dealer Hoogendijk, who had already been concerned in the sale of the *Emmaus*; Hoogendijk apparently asked few questions as he was impressed by the paintings and accepted them at once as the work of Vermeer. The first to reach the market was the *Head of Christ*, the "study" for the second; it was sold to van Beuningen in 1941. As usual there are varying reports about the price paid and the amount retained by agents; one is that van Beuningen paid \$165,000, and another that Hoogendijk first asked for \$150,000 and that \$120,000 was the figure paid. Hoogendijk and Strijbis each kept a percentage, and it is likely that Han's profit was about \$105,000. Then the *Last Supper* was completed; and van Beuningen was again interested.

This picture passed through the same hands as its predecessor; first Strijbis, then Hoogendijk, then van Beuningen. In the first instance, Hoogendijk asked for \$600,000; but van Beuningen had already paid a small

fortune to secure the others and this was beyond him. He had greatly admired the *Head*; now that the painting had been discovered for which this was clearly the study, he was more anxious than ever to secure the later picture. He could not afford them both, and he therefore proposed that he should return the study, and offered to pay \$480,000 for the *Supper*. This proposal Hoogendijk accepted; and the *Head of Christ* still remains in his possession. Of the vast sum which was paid for the *Supper* it can never be ascertained how much was received by Han, and how much was retained by Strijbis and Hoogendijk; it is certain, however, that Han's share was well in excess of three hundred thousand dollars.

It is indeed remarkable that within a period of a few months Han sold two Vermeers through the same intermediaries. Had he been lacking in complete self-confidence, he would have sought each time a new agent, told a different story of the picture's origin, and hoped that it would not be known that each of these pictures was of the same origin. But he was now sure that his pictures would be accepted. He was reckless, spurred by his belief that he was dealing with fools, that if they believed on examination that the pictures were genuine, they would be willing to buy them without difficult inquiries. They would think it more important to snatch them up quickly before they fell into German hands, before another had the opportunity of a deal which involved hundreds of thousands. After the sale of the *Last Supper* Han kept quiet for a year; at the end of 1941 he had produced his next picture; shortly afterwards he took it

for sale, and once again he dealt with the same agents as before.

The picture was *Isaac Blessing Jacob*; the agents were Strijbis and Hoogendijk; the final purchaser was Mr. W. van der Vorm, the Rotterdam collector who had bought a "de Hooch." How much was paid for it? The sale of this picture provides a first class example of the absurd difficulty in obtaining the facts; at the time of the trial, Strijbis declared that he "*did not remember*" the price. It is known that van der Vorm paid over three hundred thousand dollars; yet Strijbis kept no record of a transaction of this size; he knew neither how much he was paid nor how much he himself retained. The most reliable figure for the final price paid is in the neighborhood of \$375,000. The picture remains in the possession of van der Vorm. Shortly after it was sold, Han was ready with the next: the *Washing of the Feet of Christ*.

Because this forgery was sold to the Dutch State, a rather more accurate account exists of its sale than of the preceding pictures. Han approached the matter in a different way; he was at last wary of going through the usual channels and asked an old school-friend, Jan Kok of Deventer, then living in Amsterdam, if he would oblige him by disposing of the picture. Han explained to Kok that he had found the picture in an old collection and had bought it cheaply; he left the details of the discovery as vague as possible; as an old friend, would Jan assist him in the matter? Kok took the picture to P. de Boer, who had already handled one of Han's earlier forgeries; that had been a "de Hooch" so that the

176]

two would not be associated. Kok (who had no special knowledge of painting) told Han's story and de Boer agreed to undertake the sale. It was exhibited in Amsterdam and soon came to the notice of the authorities; government officials were anxious lest it should fall into German hands; it was examined by a government committee which included Dr. D. Hannema, Director of the Rijksbureau for the Documentation of the History of Art. This committee soon declared it a Vermeer, and at once arrangements were made for its purchase. This was authorized by Professor J. van Dam, Secretary-General to the Ministry of Education, and the price agreed was \$390,000. Of this it is known that one tenth was retained by de Boer and that Kok received \$24,000 for his services. The remainder, a total of \$327,000, was the artist's share in the matter.

After Han's confession, when Kok knew for the first time that he had been the unwitting party to a swindle, he returned to the State the money he had received. This he did of his own free will; his complicity has never been suggested, nor has it been implied that he or any others were told by Han that the pictures were not authentic, and knowingly collaborated to negotiate their sale. It is hard to believe that this was not the case. It is easy to imagine, when the same names appear over and over again, that there must have been some arrangement or understanding, beyond that of a professional dealer who buys from one customer and sells to another. Jan Kok, for example, was an old friend of Han; nothing could be more natural than that Han should go to him

and tell him he had painted a forgery. "Will you help me to secure its acceptance?" Han might have said. "I have already sold six, and if my name is associated with yet another, then sooner or later suspicion will be roused." There appears to be no doubt whatever that in fact this is not how things happened. It appears certain that Han told no one of his secret; that he believed he could trust no one sufficiently; that he acted all the time on his own, his own agent, his own adviser, his own confidant. The art-dealer Hoogendijk, for example, was concerned with the sale of five pictures, one of them a "de Hooch"; how could he have believed that four new Vermeers—which previously numbered less than forty all told—could have been discovered in so short a time? Must he not have known that there was *something* wrong somewhere? Yet he himself bought one of them; he paid \$120,000 for the *Head of Christ* which remains in his possession. Disinterested witnesses, moreover, are convinced of his sincerity.

How then can the facts be explained? What can account for the near-hysteria with which dealers and patrons hastened to involve themselves in these fabulous deals? It is easier to understand the acceptance of the *Emmaus*; this was completed and sold in time of peace, under more or less stable conditions, and in isolation; moreover it is a fine work of art, with which the greatest pains had been taken. The succeeding pictures, which followed one another with reckless regularity, were inferior in every way; they were at once purchased, at ever-increasing prices, by the leading connoisseurs of the
178]

country. Perhaps it can be explained by a desire to save national treasures, together with an exaggerated eagerness to convert personal wealth into lasting goods owing to unstable conditions of finance. And of these two causes, the former would be the more powerful; to purchase the *Last Supper*, for example, van Beuningen parted with a large number of drawings and paintings—including, as has been said, the *Head of Christ*—so that in this instance at least his action was not primarily due to a reckless desire to invest money in goods. But in addition to what may perhaps be described as Occupation-hysteria, the success which Han achieved must also be attributed to his own genius in planning the deception; above all to the style and the subjects chosen, and, indeed, to his choice of Vermeer. Before he began work on the *Emmaus*, he had considered these matters in the utmost detail, had determined that the lack of information about the life of Vermeer made him the best subject, that he would succeed by painting an “in-between” picture which would be believed to have been painted in that period of his life during which it is not known that any existing paintings were completed. Thus it was that the *Emmaus* was accepted; but thus it was all the more likely, once he had decided to continue his work, that it could be considered credible that a whole new series of Vermeers should be discovered. For it would well have happened, after the publicity afforded to his first forgery as a new *kind* of Vermeer, that pictures previously ignored should be for the first time more carefully reviewed; that their similarity to the *Emmaus*

should for the first time be recognized, and that therefore they should be offered for the first time as Vermeers. In another way, this presumed possibility simplified Han's task in securing their acceptance; for after *Emmaus*, it was natural that his next forgery should be judged by *comparison with it*—the only example of this kind of Vermeer—and that succeeding forgeries should be judged by those which had gone before, rather than by the works of the Master himself. It was of course less difficult to turn out a series of pictures in a style he had invented himself.

Nonetheless, the most remarkable fact which emerges from the story is the ease with which these pictures secured their acceptance. Perhaps the only standard by which the value of a picture should be judged is its artistic merit; if that had been the case, such prices would never have been paid. But if a man is to pay half a million dollars for a signature, for the possession of an article which derives its value almost solely from the supposed identity of its creator, it might be imagined that he would take some trouble to ensure that in fact it is what it pretends. Two questions spring to the mind: where has the picture been found? and how has its antiquity been tested? If these questions were in fact asked, they never received a satisfactory answer. It might be imagined that, when Han produced his latest work, he would concoct a convincing story to account for its discovery and to explain why such a picture had been lost and unacknowledged for three centuries; that if dealers were prepared in the first case to forego full details, their

180]

suspicion would be aroused by the second; that they would therefore insist that its former owners should be named, and its former history exactly traced; that trouble would be taken to find and interview the previous possessor, if not from doubt of its authenticity then from interest in the history of an historic canvas. One would imagine also that searching tests would be made, before the picture was declared a Vermeer. It happened otherwise.

In more than one case Han gave no explanation of how the canvas had come into his hands. None was asked and none was given. It was not thought remarkable that it should suddenly be unearthed. If any questions were asked, Han replied in the vaguest terms possible. "I found it in an old collection"; "A little-known Italian dealer sold it"; "An ancient family was disposing of its heirlooms";—these were explanations which were judged sufficient. "There is no satisfactory record of the history of this painting"—thus, one would imagine, the dealer would insist—"so it must be examined in the minutest detail before it is accepted." But several were not even X-rayed, a process which in some instances would at once have revealed the original underneath. Han had indeed developed an unique process, whereby the paint on the surface stood the most searching test, and which satisfied superficial inquiries; it takes more than the conditions of war to account for the fact that these were considered sufficient.

It cannot be escaped in the end; Han's plot succeeded: the competence of the experts was at fault and the con-

fidence in their judgment undermined. It is already known that thousands of forgeries exist; that there are, for example, more Rembrandts than the artist could ever in a lifetime have completed; * yet the judges till now have retained their dignity, the critics their reputations. Can it be pretended that those who were concerned in the van Meegeren case are a small and incompetent clique, hypnotized by circumstances, deprived for the moment of a critical faculty, the exception to a general rule? Unless such a loophole is invented, who is entitled to be accepted as a judge? Who will undertake to say what is true and what is false, to be the arbiter of value, after the immense miscalculations in this case? Or, if it be admitted that, in certain cases, no more than the true value was allowed—that the *Emmaus* and the *Last Supper*, perhaps, are of a true beauty which equals Vermeer's, are works indistinguishable from his own—who is to ensure that, without deception, the unknown artist receives the acknowledgment he deserves? The reward which he would in fact receive, for the same painting, if previously he had achieved a name and a reputation? "Is this a good picture?" or "Is this a Vermeer?"—which question, in the end, does the collector ask himself?

In all that has preceded, little has been said of the *Adulteress*, the eighth and final picture and the sixth Vermeer, which was to find its home in the collection of Goering. As it was the last to be completed, and as it was * "Of Corot's twenty-five hundred paintings," it has been said, "seventy-eight hundred are to be found in America."

directly responsible for Han's arrest and confession, it is considered separately in the following chapter. It may be said here, however, that the price paid was the highest for any of them—the equivalent of no less than \$495,000, of which, as usual, the greater part went to Han. As usual it is impossible to say, since no record was kept, exactly and with certainty how much was paid, or exactly how much was retained by go-betweens; but if all the paintings are considered together, an accurate impression can be gained. The purchasers of the eight pictures (including Goering, and the Dutch State as buyers of the *Foot-Washing*) claim that they paid an aggregate of \$2,289,000. Of this sum, van Meegeren is believed to have received \$1,650,000; the tidy balance is agents' profit. In most cases, two or perhaps three intermediaries stood between Han and the final purchaser. It is not misleading to suppose that, in each transaction, an average of thirty thousand dollars was made by each agent. Jan Kok repaid the fee received. The remainder stays as legal profit to those concerned. Against his earnings, the dealer Hoogendijk must balance \$120,000 paid for *Christ's Head* which he received back from van Beuningen. He was the only agent to be left thus with a forged Vermeer in his possession.

However much each agent may have received, Han himself was swamped with banknotes. He was unprepared for the possession of such wealth; he did not know what he ought to do with it. The transactions in which he had been involved had been kept secret when possible; or at least it was never realized that he was behind

each one of them. Although he had fooled the artists, he felt less confidence in fooling the Treasury; if he went with his thousands of banknotes to deposit them in the usual way, or to buy securities, he could expect new and searching inquiries, beyond the meager scope of those which had previously been made. There was the question of income tax; if, as he would say, he had made his fortune by selling at a profit pictures he had bought cheaply, then the profit thus made would be subject to taxation and he would be required to produce evidence of the prices he had paid. Besides, there was in Holland a capital tax which regarded all increments acquired since the war; whatever explanation he offered, his new-found wealth would come within its scope. He had already spent thousands on his Nice palace, on his Laren villa, on personal expenditure; he had already decided, in 1941, that the majority of the remainder should be somehow invested; over the years his personal expenditure increased and he still kept thousands in cash. Every few weeks he bought a house. He had abandoned beyond doubt his intention to repay, he was no longer able to consider the future, he went on from one day to the next, from one picture to the next, absorbed by his work, intoxicated by his possession of such riches. He would never stop!

Yet no man controls his own life. Only in so far as his actions affect himself can he be assured of attaining the end which he desires. Once other people are involved assurance is lost; their actions—perhaps their unthinking actions, perhaps their ill-considered actions—

184]

affect the being of all others, change their ambitions and seal their fates. In 1943, after the sale of the *Foot-Washing*, Han van Meegeren began his eighth fake. It was to represent Christ with the Adulterous Woman; "Let him that is without sin among you cast the first stone." It would be the same as with the others; he would dispose of it, he supposed, in the usual way, and anticipated no other than the usual process.

But Han was wrong for the first time. The *Adultrous* brought his downfall. Two years later, its existence wrung from him his full confession.

Chapter X

BY THE middle of 1943, Han van Meegeren was a very rich man. He had accumulated a fortune of some million and a quarter dollars and by now had abandoned any idea of repaying it. It was not only that he had already spent such a proportion that full repayment would have been impossible; he had tasted the enjoyment of wealth, had become used to being able to spend money as he liked, and was not prepared to surrender this power, when at last it had been achieved. This was his failure; he had set out with a purpose, an ideal of its own unusual kind; and having come within sight of its achievement he allowed himself to be turned aside towards other more material ends. He enjoyed being able to enjoy himself; being able to buy, without regard to their cost, the objects he desired; and he soon discovered that he could hide in the background the knowledge that he was abandoning an ideal.

He was never afraid of spending money. The intricate finances of the case are discussed in more detail on a
186]

later page; it may be said now that there is a total of no less than \$450,000 which cannot be accounted for in the last analysis.* It is certain that a great proportion of it represents Han's personal expenditure during the eight years between the sale of the first picture and his confession.

It may thus be estimated that during this fantastic period Han was spending money at the rate of some \$60,000 a year, quite apart from his expenditure on such permanent property as houses, pictures, and antiques which remained after his death and which can be sold to repay a part of his liability. It was easy to spend money during the war years in Holland; everything was "controlled," everything was in short supply, everything had its black market where prices were exorbitant. Besides spending money on himself, Han was surrounded by many friends whom he entertained on a lavish scale. To be host in this way pleased him immensely; he loved to be responsible for large and extravagant parties, where he was at once the center and the inspiration. Night after night, in a favorite café, he would foregather with fifteen or twenty of his friends; there would be drinking and argument and song; there would be dancing and gaiety—or philosophic discussions—as the spirit moved him; everyone was at ease when Han was the host. Such evenings, with the best food and excellent wines for all, took place without regard to their expense and were repeated again and again; Han always paid with a shrug. Everyone knew that he had twice won the

*See chapter XII, pages 212-13.

National Lottery—it had been a splendid evening, when for the second time he had broken this news to his friends!—and none was unwilling to help him spend his winnings.

In addition to expenditure of this kind, Han bought many of the real Old Masters which he loved to have in his house, to admire and study. His collection of paintings by Terborch was one of the finest of its kind in Holland. His knowledge of pictures in general enabled him from time to time to make a fine profit, by buying a valuable canvas cheaply and selling it at its true price; the fact that it was known that he carried on a business of this kind made his work simpler when the ancient picture he was offering for sale happened to have been painted by himself. But many of the genuine Old Masters which he bought he kept himself, to delight in; in themselves they accounted for many tens of thousands of dollars.

So the money went—riotously, crazily and without shame. For Han it was a life that was totally without aim and totally destructive. The situation mastered him completely; he was no longer remotely master of himself. Wealth and his own particular greatness were entirely demoralizing. As each new picture was completed, it became more and more difficult—more and more impossible—to put an end to them; to confess that they were his; to receive the personal triumph which was now assured, if he adhered to his original plan to reveal his secret; to acquire not only the notoriety he desired, but also the fame which was due to him as the painter of a

188]

picture which is truly great. Before the war he was daunted by opposition and poverty; afterwards by weakness and wealth. Soon through the strains and stresses to which he subjected himself, his health began to fail; but the tempo of his life never slowed.

Han had always enjoyed a gay and riotous life when he happened at the time to have money in his pockets. He had always been a heavy drinker when the world was treating him well and he could afford it; earlier that had been seldom enough but now there was money and to spare. Under the strain of the life he was living Han found it difficult to relax and sleep; he began to take morphia; soon it was a habit and he used the drug heavily. Thus it was easy to forget, to slip easily away from the unreal situation in which he always found himself; his mind became blurred, his perception blunted, his interests diminished. His marriage with Jo was crumbling; it was impossible to live with him for long, to tolerate his erratic behavior and his roving affections. Morphia, abandonment, and the strain of war and secrecy, were destroying the man, robbing him of the greatness he possessed and the potential greatness.

Han's work—and almost his only work now, for he painted seldom in his own name—was the painting of forged pictures, and if the prices paid for his completed works were any criterion, he had progressed rapidly from one success to another. But his artistic and his technical skill show rapid signs of decay. It is only increasingly remarkable that they were sufficient to deceive. Despite his distractions, his success and demoral-

ization, Han continued till the end with the work which he had marked out as his own; he was fascinated by it, unable to stop even when he had amassed his entire fortune. When his eighth picture was discovered in Germany and traced to him—the discovery which led to his confession—he was already at work on his ninth. It would have continued till his death.

Yet Han had the good sense not to spend all his fortune, even had this been physically possible, on extravagances for himself and his friends. He was, indeed, in financial difficulties of a kind, and as ever he could ask advice from no one. For although he was paid over a million and a half dollars for his complete series, there was little he could do with it. He could not invest it in the ordinary way, since inevitably he would be called upon to explain his wealth, as soon as officials were aware of its existence. A proportion he kept in banknotes—not from any hoarding or miserly instincts, but simply because there was nothing he could do with it. This money was hidden in houses in Laren and Amsterdam; some in the pipes of a central heating system, some beneath the floor boards of a bedroom, some in a concealed cupboard; Han never dared to leave money for long in the same place and moved it from one hiding place to another if suspicion were aroused. In so doing, he deceived himself on at least one occasion; he buried several thousands in his garden at Laren, and later forgot that it was buried. I searched for this missing hoard on a visit to Holland at the end of 1948.

Although I was unsuccessful it may not be out of place
190]

to tell the story briefly. The money was put in a box and hidden in 1942; its hiding place was one of many and soon afterwards Han let the house and moved to Amsterdam. Not till after his confession did he remember this particular cache; then he was under constant watch and was unable to dig for it. Its location he passed to his daughter, now living in London; it was she who told me the secret and asked me to search for the money. Readily agreeing to this strange quest, I spent two afternoons digging in the garden of the Laren villa, to the great interest of the local inhabitants. Though I found no banknotes I believe I can account for them; I followed a chain of clues which led me to a conclusion.

I learned that, a year before, a young gardener found an *empty* box buried within a few yards of the spot where I was searching. In a nearby village, I discovered the gardener. His description of the box tallied with the one I had been given in London, and he told me that he had found nearby, also buried, a box of Canadian rifle ammunition. From the present occupants of the house I learned that Canadians had been billeted there after the Liberation; and from a previous occupant that they had buried their refuse in the garden of the house. What happened, then? Was a Canadian soldier ordered to bury a box of ammunition, no longer required—and, in digging, did he hit by chance upon the fortune? The Canadians in Laren (I was told) were never short of cash . . . Other solutions can doubtless be offered; however it happened, Han never found the tens of thousands which he had concealed in this place.

With the rest of his money he was less careless. In 1943 he moved to Amsterdam, not only to avoid the solitude of Laren—he must come each day to Amsterdam to meet his friends—but also because by now he had considerable interests there. He had acquired property over the years: he bought a house from time to time, or an hotel, or a night club, and thus had a considerable income as well as some capital that was reasonably secure. The building in Amsterdam which he chose for his own was a large house in the Keizergracht, a quiet and fashionable street which runs by a canal through the center of the city; thither he moved with Jo and his belongings, for the Laren villa he let unfurnished.

But his marriage with Jo was ended; they were divorced in the same year; afterwards they continued, strangely enough, to live in the same house, and therefore to see one another from time to time. The arrangement seemed to suit them both; it continued until Han's death and Jo still lives in the house on the Keizergracht.

It was here towards the end of 1943 that Han began work on his eighth picture, for which his reward was to be greatest, which was to become the most notorious, and which was in the end to lead to his confession. It was here in Amsterdam that he began work on the *Adultr*ess, which was to end in the possession of Goering.

This work, his sixth "Vermeer," is far from being his best. Its production took a couple of months; it was hurriedly completed with none of the concentration and care which had marked the *Emmaus* and the *Last Supper*. It is painted on top of an older painting which Han

192]

did not bother to remove; underneath his picture, the original can still be discovered. In fact, of course, the paint became so hard in the baking process that it is almost impossible to remove; the original can be discerned by X-rays. No such test, however, was considered necessary by any of the intermediaries who occupied their usual positions between Han as the painter and Field-Marshal Goering as the buyer.

Han's last picture passed through the hands of entirely new agents. It has already been recounted that, after going again and again with the first pictures to Strijbis and Hoogendijk, he sold the *Foot-Washing* through Kok and de Boer. It was natural that in the end he would be afraid of going over-often to the same people, since if each were handled by different go-betweens, it might not be realized, owing to the necessary secrecy with which each of these operations was surrounded, that he was associated with each. It is only extraordinary that he relied so often upon the gullibility of Strijbis and Hoogendijk. Han had no desire to dispose of his fakes to the Germans. In the first place it was risky; there would have been an additionally severe penalty if his authorship were discovered before the war ended. Besides, Han knew that he would be suspect if it were known that he had been concerned in a transaction which resulted in the sale of a Vermeer to the enemy; to have dealings of any kind was contemptible enough, to share responsibility for the loss of a great Dutch painting would be unforgivable. It would in fact be to Han's advantage if all these pictures stayed in Holland; and he

knew it. So long as they were sold to Dutch collectors, there was an air of secrecy and conspiracy which helped him; the picture must be kept quiet, its sale must be in private, it must never be exhibited; the Germans admire Vermeer, and if they hear of the existence of a new painting, then anything may happen to it. Once a picture was sold to the Nazis, it would become altogether more open; it could be hung in public, studied, and criticized. This more than any patriotic impulse—and indeed it would have been more patriotic to do the reverse—made Han insist when each picture was sold that on no account should it fall into German hands.

In the case of his last picture these plans went astray. A Dutch dealer, Reinstra van Strijvesande, heard of the "discovery" of a new Vermeer, and approached Han with a view to buying it. Han knew that Reinstra had been employed by the Bavarian banker Aloys Miedl, and feared, therefore, that he might have some sympathy with the Germans. Before reaching any agreement, he specified therefore that on no account must the picture fall into German hands; none the less, Miedl heard of its existence, and thence it came to the notice of Walter Hofer who was employed by Goering. It was through his agency that the *Adultress* came into the possession of the Nazi leader, who agreed to pay \$495,000 for his acquisition. Of this each agent took his customary share and Han was richer by some \$360,000.

It was soon suspected in some circles that Han had been connected with this picture and the suspicion did nothing to increase his popularity. After the war, charges

of collaboration were to be brought against him, and as is well known these were proved to be false. The chief reasons for these charges were, firstly, his complicity in the sale of the picture to Goering, before it was known that he himself had painted it; and secondly the discovery of a book of Han's paintings among the possessions of Hitler, which bore the dedication: "To my beloved Fuehrer—Han van Meegeren." It is remarkable that although the validity of both charges has been entirely disproved, the impression still sometimes remains that van Meegeren was a pro-Nazi during the war years and as such should be condemned. Nothing can be further from the truth.

By the sale of his forgery to Germany, through which, with all the irony in the world, he is still sometimes condemned, Han must be credited, even if it were accidental, with perhaps the only deed of patriotism in his history. He secured the return to their homeland of valued works of art which might otherwise have been lost. For Goering did not pay for the picture in cash; instead he returned to Holland in exchange a large number of less valuable Dutch treasures which had previously been removed and which he was prepared to surrender to acquire the new masterpiece. In the sale of this picture, for which he was specially condemned, and for which some illogical stigma still attaches to him, Han defrauded none of his countrymen; so far from betraying to the enemy an ancient and valued canvas by an esteemed Dutch master, he secured the return to their native land of truly ancient pictures which otherwise

must have remained in the hands of the enemy. When it was believed after the war by the Dutch authorities that Han had been guilty of the appalling crime of selling a priceless Dutch painting to the Nazis, this was so serious a charge that the necessity for disproving it led Han at last to admit it was his own; and at the same time to take credit for the rest of his work. The penalties for collaboration were extreme; not only the legal punishment but the social ostracism which must accompany and succeed it. What could be more ridiculous than to persist, when it has been proved beyond doubt that Han himself painted the work of art in question, in the supposition at first justified that Han had been guilty of an act of treason or heresy? It seems abundantly clear that in securing the return to his country of many valued paintings, in return for a canvas which now the world alleges valueless, he was on the contrary, though not by design, a party to a great fraud upon a hated enemy.

Yet this opinion is not shared by some of his countrymen. I spoke in Amsterdam to citizens who had had dealings with him or had made his acquaintance; often there would be the whispered comment: "Of course, you know, he was a Nazi—he was a friend to Goering. He could never have sold him a picture if he had not been closely associated with the Fascists. And then there was the book of his paintings—found with a devoted dedication to Hitler himself." These suggestions seem to be nonsensical; though they are still current, Han's innocence in these particular matters was placed beyond doubt even before his trial. The explanation of the

196]

"dedication" is simple. The book was a collection of Han's drawings, which was in general sale during the war; a number of copies was autographed by the artist—a common procedure. When faced with the charge that in this instance he had added the incriminating inscription, Han at once challenged the assumption that this too was in his handwriting. An expert was called, who confirmed that the words "To my beloved Fuehrer" had been added by another. From this moment the charge was dropped; it being evident that the book had been bought by an ardent Nazi who added the dedication above the artist's autograph. Despite the fact that the allegation was officially dropped, the legend remains in some quarters that Han wooed the Nazis; and whatever opinions may otherwise be formed of him and his activities, it is wrong that this one should be allowed to persist.

Here then is the situation in the summer of 1944: Han and Jo are divorced, living uneasily together in the same large house; Han's pictures, prized beyond any others, hang in the country's most famous collections; his personal fortune is immense, he is a considerable property owner; he is at work on his ninth picture, another Vermeer, which he will shortly finish and present to the world in the usual way; it will fetch another half a million dollars to add to his hoard. He is fifty-five years old; tired and grey, keeping himself going by artificial stimulus, drugging heavily and in failing health, suffering from the weak heart which he had forgotten since his earliest childhood; continuing the work which never

failed to intrigue him, which he could no more abandon than the drugs to which he was addicted. At this moment, hopes rise in a million homes throughout Europe; the Allies land in France; Europe is in turmoil; for weeks and months there can be no ordinary activities. All is relegated to second importance beside the immense prospect of Liberation. The beachhead is established, the armies progress; soon Holland is free and soon Hitler is dead. The end of occupation, the beginning of freedom; and each man's life is changed once more.

How was Han affected? He believed he was not affected at all. He did not see that it made much difference; there were small increases in personal freedom; he did not believe it would deeply affect his way of life, his plans, his ambitions. He was, in any case, an old man, ravaged already by the life he had been leading, by its recklessness and its strain; he did not consciously plan anything different; he would go on living in the same way, he would paint a new picture from time to time, he had many friends and could afford to buy whatever took his fancy. Soon, he supposed, he would die. And thoughts of death made him think: "I must undertake the writing of a full confession which can be found when I am dead, complete with every detail. The war is over, I can return to Nice, I can recover the evidence which has been hidden there throughout these years; I will make it clear beyond doubt which pictures I have painted, and then when I am gone I will leave it to the lawyers to untangle the tale." So Han planned, but

198]

somehow never brought himself to the action he proposed. Hundreds of miles away, strange facts were being discovered, suspicions were being aroused, investigations were being made. All of this was unknown to Han; he had no presentiment in the summer of 1945 that at last his secret was about to be revealed.

Chapter XI

IN THE spring of 1945, allied investigators found the *Adultress* among Goering's collection in Berchtesgaden. A written record of its sale existed; and the Dutch members of the commission learned with interest that it had been sold to Goering's agent by Aloys Miedl who in his turn had obtained it from Reinstra. Thus for the first time an organized investigation was taking place into the past history of one of Han's pictures, and at once it hit upon those weaknesses which would have been apparent at once before, if at any time such an inquiry had been considered necessary by those concerned.

Miedl had fled; in Amsterdam he was sought in vain. Reinstra was questioned but denied that he had knowledge at the time of selling the picture, of its likely destination; it was no business of his, to whom Miedl had sold it; Miedl was merely the highest bidder, and he knew nothing of his political proclivities. He told his questioners that he had bought the picture from Han van Meegeren, and thus it happened that at the end of

May, 1945, Han, who was living in his mansion on the Keizergracht in Amsterdam, received a visit from the political police. He was taken by surprise for he had heard no whisper that inquiries were taking place; but he had long been prepared for a situation of this kind, had answers ready, and expected that as in other cases he would be able to give explanations as fully as would be required by his questioners. This time he was less fortunate. The police, whose own cash was not in danger, were far less easily satisfied than any who had dealt in the paintings.

They treated him with great respect. There was, after all, only the smallest suspicion that he had been concerned in an illegal deal. He was a great man with a wide reputation—great as is any possessor of such a fortune—and it was well-known in Amsterdam that in addition to his not very successful work as a painter he had carried on a large and profitable business by buying and selling valuable masterpieces. Perhaps he was sometimes eccentric in his behavior, and he was certainly unafraid of spending what he had earned upon riotous celebration, but there had been no official suggestion during the long war years that he had had any dealings with the enemy, and it was necessary to approach the subject with some tact. So far as was certainly known at the time, he had sold this painting to Reinstra in all innocence; would he mind saying where had he bought it? A routine enquiry, that was all. The painting had after all ended up in the possession of a very great Nazi. Perhaps

Mr. van Meegeren could provide them with some additional information?

"I heard that the *Adultress* finished up with Goering," said Han, "and the news angered me, since I had purposely specified to Reinstra that it should remain in this country. However, as he explained to me, the Field Marshal did not pay in cash, but by returning in exchange over two hundred other Dutch paintings which till then had been lost. I felt that this provided some mitigation, especially as the combined value of those paintings was so far in excess of the value I placed on the Vermeer. But I have had no dealings whatever with the Nazis; I had no knowledge that this picture would end in enemy hands; I simply wanted to sell it and Reinstra offered me a good price."

"We have no doubt that that is the case. But perhaps you would be so kind as to tell us where you bought the painting in the first instance?"

"Where I *bought* the painting? Certainly. I bought it in Italy, just before the war."

"In Italy? You were in Italy before the war? From whom did you buy it? From a dealer or from a private individual?"

"The latter. But I am bound by an agreement not to disclose his identity."

Han told the same kind of story which had been told about the *Emmaus*; it was an impoverished Italian family who were selling their heirlooms; they did not wish that this poverty should be known and had particularly specified that their names should not be mentioned in

202]

connection with the sale. "As a matter of fact, I entertained some doubts as to the authenticity of the picture; it's something like the *Emmaus* though unusual as a Vermeer; the price which I was offered implied that Goering's advisers were satisfied it was authentic and this again relieved the shock when I heard it was bound for Berchtesgaden."

But the political police would not be diverted from the information which they required. They smiled politely and sipped the *Bols* which Han had offered them; but they persisted in their question.

"You understand," they said, "that your information will be entirely confidential. If we can be sure that it all happened in Italy, before the war, that may be the end of the matter. We must investigate the background of those with whom you dealt; and of course we must have positive evidence in writing that the sale did in fact take place. If we can inspect the receipt, then in all probability that will be enough; it will prove that the picture was in fact sold to you and it may not even be necessary for the seller to be questioned. There is sure to be some record of his political history."

His *political* history? Han thought. Good God, he saw what they were after! They knew the picture had been sold to Germany; he had said that he had bought it in Italy; what an idiot and fool he had been! They were thinking that perhaps he had bought the picture from Italian Fascists and acted as intermediary between them and the Germans. He had never thought of that; he had never thought of the idle, dreamy, sentimental Italians

he had known in the South as "Fascists." He began to bluster.

"There was no receipt," he said. "I've never kept any written record. I'm not sure that I even remember the name of the family concerned. Lived near Ventimiglia, I believe; I was there in '31. But it was to avoid enquiries of just this kind—questions of finances and motives—that it was positively insisted that no name should be mentioned. It was part of an agreement; I cannot break it. What on earth does it matter to you, in any event? Even if they were Fascists—I was pursuing a legitimate end."

"Fascists, Mr. van Meegeren? It has never been suggested that they were Fascists."

"Then the devil take you. I can say no more."

Next day, Han was arrested.

Han wondered if the time had come at last for his confession. It was not at all as he had planned that things should happen, though it would clear him at once of the charge which he was now facing. Yet he did not wish that it should appear that the confession should be wrung from him under duress; he desired to choose his own time, and circumstances most suitable for his effect. Besides, his statement would be less easily believed if it were known that its acceptance would clear him of a more serious charge—more serious in the light of those moral values which were general at the time. Should he confess? Or if he kept his mouth shut, what might be the consequences? After all, nothing could be proved.

But Han when he arrived before his accusers found an attitude very different from that of respectful defer-

ence which he had experienced on the previous day. The Dutch people was out to find its traitors, and once a suspicion had been awoken, that was practically enough. More than any other, the collaborator was hated and despised; more than any other he was sought out now by a rightly vindictive populace. And in Han's case, in the past twenty-four hours, the police had made up their minds: of *course* he was a traitor, of *course* he was guilty; he had obtained from his Fascist associates in Italy, in return for the services he rendered them, this great Dutch treasure; had he presented or sold it to a Dutch museum, or exhibited it himself, that might lighten his offence; but he had done the worst thing possible, and sold it to his friends the Germans. Before he had time to work out a careful plan, he was submitted to a barrage of questioning which was designed to break down his defense.

He was old and he was weak. He stuck however to his story. Damn these fellows! Why should they treat him in this way! The devil take them! He would never reveal his secret. Yet the questioners were skilled at their job, the extraction of information. They knew that if they continued long enough he would tire and his resistance would break. They knew that the time will come when no man will go on, when he will say anything if that will give him sleep, if it will allow him rest. For Han this moment came at last. He could stand it no more, the repetition over and over again of the same questions and the same answers, the absurd insistence that he was a traitor—he who had never felt interest or emotion over

any political affairs. And so, in the Amsterdam police station, from a tired and broken man came—under circumstances so different from those he had then planned—the confession which, eight years before, he had longed to be able to make, more than anything else in the world.

“Fools!” he shouted: “You are fools like the rest of them! I sold no Vermeer to the Germans! I sold no treasure! I painted the picture myself! It is a valueless van Meegeren for which Goering paid this fortune. And for eight years I have deceived others—just as he was deceived.”

At first the police thought that he was mad—or desperately inventing a crazy story to account for his criminal behavior. But they allowed him to rest and sleep. When he awoke refreshed, and remembered his admission, he insisted at once that he should write a full confession; and then they could check the facts and discover who was crazy.

Han's confession at once caused a sensation. The concerned artistic experts, hurriedly called in, began to feel apprehensive; their reputations were at stake and the affair must be kept quiet; discreet inquiries must be made, and each of the alleged forgeries must be found, its history investigated. It was not long, however, before the newspapers got hold of the story. It was front-page news in a dozen countries. The story was of a kind which makes glad the heart of every news editor; it was to provide first-class copy for the next two years. Han, who was allowed a limited freedom, was besieged by reporters

and photographers. He wanted nothing more. He wanted to insure above anything that the world should know of his achievements. Reporters were only too ready to help him. Charges of collaboration were dropped; but the Dutch authorities were at a loss to know what to do next.

Meantime the strange story was discussed all over the world; the arguments began which have not yet subsided. Did he in fact paint the pictures? If he did, what did this prove? If he did not, how could the discovery be explained of so many Vermeers in so short a period? For the first time, this question was asked; as some of those sold during the war had been kept a secret, it was not realized till now that there had been such an outburst of Old Masters. How could it be proved either way? Van Meegeren said that in his Nice villa there would be found a strip of canvas which he had cut from the famous *Emmaus*. Would this strip be found? If so, why should he have kept it, except for this very purpose?

After a month of deliberation, the authorities had an idea. "If, as you say, you painted the *Emmaus*, you should be able without doubt to provide a copy of it."

"A copy?" said Han. "I'll do better than that. Give me the materials and I will paint another Vermeer—before witnesses. That at least should satisfy you."

It was agreed. All that he asked was put at Han's disposal. In August 1945 he began work on his ninth picture—this time before six witnesses to represent all the interested parties. He worked hard, had little leisure, was closely guarded by police who followed him wher-

ever he went. The technique he used was unaltered; the subject was again biblical. His picture depicted the Young Christ teaching in the Temple. It was a large canvas and one of his best. By October it was completed and was at once seen to be of the same high standard as those which had preceded it. Han knew that his ambition had been achieved, that now it was only a matter of time before his formal sentence gave the official seal to his success.

It is hardly surprising that there was a delay of over two years before his trial took place, though at first it was expected that it would be in May, 1946. An international panel was set up to consider all the evidence. A detective was sent to the Nice villa to find the strip of canvas, but returned empty-handed. The international committee which was headed by the Belgian Dr. P. B. M. Coremans found embarrassments of every kind, and after six months had not begun to reach a decision. They were heading irrevocably for the verdict that Han had painted the pictures; but the expression of such an opinion implied the rank incompetence of their colleagues in the art world. In December, too, British experts were asked to give their views: Dr. Harold Plenderleith, deputy keeper of the British Museum Research Laboratory, and Mr. Francis Rawlings, scientific adviser to the National Gallery. They arrived in Amsterdam early in January, spent a month studying the pictures, made their reports and returned to London. By the spring of 1947 the report of the scientists was complete; it was now being considered by the legal authorities. They

208]

could not remember a similar case; they were not at all sure of the charge which would be brought. He was a slippery customer; and if in fact he painted the pictures (as now appeared certain) then he must be faced with an accusation which he would be unable to escape.

For "false pretenses" might be difficult to prove, if Han were to allege that he simply produced pictures, and left it to the experts (who alone were qualified to express an opinion) to say who had painted them; it might not be possible to show that on any occasion he had said "I believe this painting to be a Vermeer," but rather that he had said "Here is a painting. What do you think of it? How much will you pay for it?" But there was a legal way out from this difficulty. Each of the pictures had been signed in the name of Vermeer or de Hooch; it is certainly an offense to forge a signature, and Han van Meegeren had certainly forged eight—by his own admission. This then could be the charge; of course it was to succeed, but it raises an interesting hypothetical question.

For the Vermeers had been variously signed, some "I Meer" and some with the artist's initials, "I.V.M." (Iohannes Ver Meer); and it will be seen that the latter are strangely similar to Han's own: H.V.M. (Henricus van Meegeren). Had Han been christened Jan, and had he signed all the pictures with the initials only, could the charge of forging signatures have been brought? Could any accusation have been made? Could he not have said that he had painted half a dozen pictures and signed them; and that if some idiot were

ready to pay a million or so for them, then that was his own affair? An interesting question, never answered, but in any case there was no such escape; it could not be pretended that Han was an abbreviation for Hans (Johannes) and in any case the pictures had been signed in full and there were the de Hoochs. There was no escape—even if Han wanted one.*

This was a strange life for Han. For two and a half years he was neither free nor condemned. The finances of the case are described in the next chapter; but Han was declared a bankrupt at the start of '46 and from then until his death he had only limited money supplies. However he had many friends, and he lived a riotous and reckless life. His health was failing as the result of his excesses but he refused all medical advice. Late in 1947 he collapsed and was taken to a hospital in Amsterdam, where doctors diagnosed angina pectoris. They ordered complete rest and kept him in bed for a month. Han remembered his early childhood; strange that for all these years he had forgotten it.

"Little Henri has a weak heart."

"Does it mean that I will die soon?"

Well, he would die. Once the trial was over, he had no reason or desire to live. Released from hospital, he would not rest; he continued to drink heavily. During 1947 he had several minor attacks. He did not care. He made friends with hundreds of the little men of Am-

* Han's artist son, Jacques, has exactly the same initials as Vermeer, and I hope he will be able to resist this additional temptation to follow his father's footsteps.

sterdam, bought them drinks, sang songs with them, enjoyed himself. He had practically ceased painting; an occasional sketch, a portrait in oils of his daughter. He lived on in the house on the Keizergracht. He saw Jo each day, who lived still in the same house and who lives there yet. He spent much time with his son Jacques, continued the lessons he had always given him, explained to him in detail his "Vermeer" technique. He was exhausted in every way. He was too tired to enjoy the fullness of his success.

Slowly the end drew near. It was September, 1947. His trial would take place next month. The evidence was prepared. The verdict was certain in advance. He was ready for it and anxious to be found guilty—anxious thus to find the world guilty, just as he had planned.

Chapter XII

AT THE beginning of 1946, soon after the completion before witnesses of the *Young Christ*, Han van Meegeren was declared bankrupt. This unusual action on the part of the authorities amounts, of course, to a pre-judgment of the case; it was apparently assumed already that he would be proved to have painted the eight pictures and that there would be claims against him in excess of his remaining assets. The financial situation, which is set out in this chapter, is involved but of interest; it is complicated by the facts that it still cannot definitely be stated how much was obtained by Han himself for the pictures, owing to the secrecy and complexity of each negotiation, and besides, at the time of writing, the claims on his estate are still being considered, and the value of his remaining property is still unknown. It is likely to be many years before an official solution is reached to the tangled problem; but it is possible already to gain an accurate impression and to consider in detail some of the implications.

The total paid for the eight pictures was \$2,289,000; * this was claimed to have been paid by the final purchasers, and in each case a percentage was received by intermediaries. The total received by Han was considerably lower; the official and most probable estimate is \$1,650,000. It is taken for granted that the go-betweens acted in good faith; it was never suggested in court that any were accessories, or at all aware of the true origin of the forgeries; they are free from financial claim, however much their artistic reputations may have suffered. They did nothing more than pursue their legal professions, of buying in one market and selling in another; there has been no proposal that they should forfeit any part of the total they collectively received, and there is no justification in law for any suggestion that they should.

* The approximate figures are as follows:

	florins	\$
<i>Emmaus</i>	520,000	174,000
<i>Card-Players</i> . . .	290,000	117,000
<i>Drinking-Party</i> . .	220,000	87,000
<i>Christ's Head</i> . .	550,000	165,000
<i>Last Supper</i> . . .	1,600,000	480,000
<i>Isaac & Jacob</i> . . .	1,270,000	381,000
<i>Foot-Washing</i> . .	1,300,000	390,000
<i>Adulteress</i>	1,650,000	495,000
	<hr/>	<hr/>
	fl7,400,000	\$2,289,000
	<hr/>	<hr/>

(Dollar figures, here as in the rest of the book, are approximate.)

The present value of Han's remaining estate is difficult to estimate, since much of his property—mostly in the form of houses—has not yet been sold and a round figure of six hundred thousand dollars must suffice. In addition to this, Han paid about \$240,000 to his second wife on the occasion of the divorce, and it is probable that some tens of thousands are still hidden in secret places in Laren and Amsterdam. The Dutch government during the war called in all thousand-guilder notes, and those who possessed large quantities were called upon to explain how they had been acquired. On this occasion, Han "declared" a total of \$450,000, saying that he had sold a collection of Old Masters. Unconvinced by his explanation, the government retained \$270,000 till inquiries should be completed; it was never returned. It is thus possible to account for some \$1,200,000 * of the \$1,650,000 received by Han, the remainder representing his personal expenditure over the ten years between 1937 and his death.

Upon his remaining estate of \$600,000, there are claims which amount to just under three million. At first it seems absurd that these should exceed the total paid for the pictures, and should be nearly double the total received by Han. The absurdity is explained in

* Estimated value of remaining estate	. . \$600,000
Confiscated by Dutch government	. . 270,000
Payment to second wife 240,000
Estimate of bank notes still hidden	. . 90,000
	<hr/>
	\$1,200,000
	<hr/>

the following way. The principal claim is of course from those who paid for the forgeries and who would be entitled, if there were sufficient funds, to the difference between the value of each picture as a Vermeer or a de Hooch and its value as a van Meegeren. This figure is almost impossible to determine, and no official estimate has yet been made. The *claims*, however, under this heading alone, amount to very little less than the \$2,289,000 paid. *In addition to this*, the Dutch authorities claim a matter of some \$900,000 in respect of unpaid income and capital taxes on the sums received during the ten years—besides the \$270,000 already confiscated.

There is therefore in progress at the time of writing an undignified struggle for what is left of Han's fortune, in which the State itself is the chief claimant. How each claim will be settled it is impossible to foretell, except that it appears unlikely that the State itself will receive less than it deserves. The official who must discover the solution is faced with an unenviable task. He must consider values, not prices; and values have generally a subjective basis. It is generally admitted that the sums paid were absurdly high, even for Vermeers; the view may be taken that it is not unjust to penalize buyers for their extravagance. It is regarding the notorious eighth picture, Goering's *Adultrous*, that the strangest situation arises. The State claims that this picture was illegally sold to an enemy alien, who therefore would not be entitled, even if he were alive, to claim any pro-

portion of the price paid. The State therefore takes it upon itself to claim *on his behalf*, and will appropriate to itself the result of such a claim.

This is an action which it is difficult to understand by any of the accepted standards of justice. If it be granted that Goering were an enemy leader, then it lies within the duty of each citizen to defraud and to deceive him on every possible occasion. To propose that the money he paid must be returned to the Dutch State, who claim in addition a further sixty per cent in unpaid taxes in respect of this picture as well as of the others, is a remarkable reward for an action which would be considered patriotic in isolation. Even if it were not his intention, Han secured the return to their country of the hundreds of other pictures with which Goering paid for a forgery now supposed valueless; in return it is suggested that the artist should not only forfeit the fortune paid, but should be penalized in addition to the extent of some \$240,000.

It is, in any case, hard to understand how the State can feel justified in claiming taxes from the estate, when claims for repayment are already in excess of the sum received by van Meegeren. If he or his executors had been allowed to retain all that had been paid—if it were said that the pictures had that value, and that value only, at which they were estimated; that Vermeer or van Meegeren, the value were the same, and none had been defrauded; then indeed some claim on the net total received by Han might be justified, since such a sum represents his income over a certain period, dur-

216]

ing which no taxes (other than the \$270,000 which was confiscated) have been paid. Such is far from being the case. Because of his confession, and because of the claims for damages (assuming they are successful) Han, as it were, has worked at a loss; he has received, it is true, certain sums on the credit side, but more than this, quite apart from taxation, is now being claimed by the buyers. It would be amusing if there were a claim for repayment of tax on the basis of "business loss" throughout this period. The Dutch argument, however, is altogether different; the claims for damages which arise now have no connection whatever with the fact that an income was earned on which no tax was paid; and it is thus that the claims which are now being considered reach their astonishing figure.

It is natural that the van Meegeren family should have no interest whatever in these claims. It is impossible that they should, when they amount to five times the total available, so that there is not the remotest chance that anything will be left after every claim has been satisfied. Even if the claims for damages were disallowed, even if tens of thousands were found buried in Laren, the claims for tax alone are far greater than the estate. Once the principle has been granted, however, that it is just to tax such income, the claims for damages become the strangest problem which officialdom is likely to face. Two figures must be determined for each picture; its value as an Old Master at the time of sale and its value as a van Meegeren now. The difference between these two figures is the just claim of each

buyer—of which he will receive perhaps twenty cents in the dollar. Its value as an Old Master at the time of the sale is not the same as the price paid. Its value as a van Meegeren now is practically impossible to assess.

Here is the whole crux of the matter: *what* is their value? *how* is the value of a painting judged? The reply of the business man is that these paintings should be offered for sale by auction in the open market, and that under such conditions their price and their value coincide. This assumes that professional evaluation is infallible, a proposition which will be widely disputed. Even if such an assessment could be accepted, it is clearly unlikely that such an auction would take place—at least until after the damages have been assessed. Imagine the situation at present of one who once paid, say, \$300,000 for a van Meegeren forgery. For the purposes of the assessment of damages he naturally desires that the present value of the picture should be assessed as low as possible—at a figure, indeed, which is so insignificant a proportion of the sum paid that it is hardly worth deducting from the total. “Even if it might fetch three thousand dollars now in the open market, as an artistic curio” he might say “it reduces my claim by only one per cent and I should be entitled to the balance of \$297,000.” But the value of such a picture, in so far as it can ever be determined, is likely to be higher than such an owner would suggest; none of the pictures has been offered for sale. If the purchaser can minimize the value of the picture at the present time, and maximize it after damages have been assessed by offer-

218]

ing it in the open market, he will have his best chance of recompensing one way and another as great a proportion as possible of his total loss.

Fortunately the Curator, who is in charge of the bankruptcy, is aware of this possibility. "I believe that the prices paid were too high" he told me in Amsterdam when I discussed the matter with him; "and I believe that the owners underestimate their present value." There is no possible precedent by which this may be determined; and a precedent is essential unless the pictures are submitted to the actual test. When world interest in the case was at its height, van Meegeren is said to have been approached by an American agent, who offered a sum equivalent to the total paid already if he could buy the entire collection. Had Han been able to accept this offer if in fact it was made—and he could not, for the pictures were not his, and he had no right of access to them—the financial situation might have righted itself; he would have been able to repay each purchaser in full. In addition he would have had available for the payment of taxes, the remainder of his personal fortune—and perhaps \$480,000 in addition, if the State could have been persuaded to receive this sum as taxation rather than on Goering's behalf, as they claim at present. This incident is only mentioned here to indicate that, if the pictures were offered for sale, their prices might surprise the world; not only because they have an historic or curiosity value—how much would Goering's picture fetch?—but also because of the real artistic value of a picture such as the *Emmaus*.

It would be unusual, however, to insist that the pictures must be offered for sale in order that their value may be known before damages are assessed; in such an event, the bidding would be interesting and instructive.

The tendency of the owner is naturally to insist that the price he paid was a fair price for an Old Master; but he will estimate at as low a price as he dares the new value once their authorship is known. Thus it is he who reckons the greatest possible difference between the value of a picture which is believed to be a Vermeer and the value of the same picture when it is known to be a van Meegeren. At the other end of the scale will be found the opposite opinion; it was held by van Meegeren himself, and it will be held by many others, not only unsuccessful artists, who refuse to believe that the value of a picture depends on anything but its own merit; who assert that it is unaltered by the discovery that it is a forgery; that it still provides the same æsthetic delight, in whichever century it was born and whoever held the brush. It is logically difficult, and indeed I find it impossible, to depart from this belief; nor do I understand how those can believe otherwise, who wrote, for example, articles on the *Emmaus* as "the greatest Vermeer," unless they abandon any claims as intelligent critics, or as judges of shape and form. The man who thinks otherwise must admit frankly that the value of a picture derives principally and above all from the fact that it was painted by a particular hand; that one who is known and respected throughout the world was responsible for its production. He must hold

that it is for this reason, *and almost for this reason alone*, that it is worth a fortune; and this is the quandary in which many still find themselves. They have, in truth, fallen exactly into the trap which Han sprung for them. Whatever else may be thought of Han, and whatever is said of any of his work, his beliefs are in fact justified, his belief in himself is vindicated; faith in the expert is to some extent destroyed, with many accepted standards of artistic recognition. It may not be right that this should be the case; it may be useless and indeed destructive that this should be so; it makes no difference to the fact that these things have happened, and that they cannot now be changed. It is not only that any expert opinion on a doubtful picture must now itself be suspect even more than hitherto; the question "How often has it been done before?" must always remain unanswered. It is not only that in this case there is no yardstick by which the value of these paintings can be measured; doubt is cast on every work and, if lessons be learned, value must be reckoned irrespective of the artist.

By any other name . . . is it not the principle throughout trade and commerce? If two firms produce identical goods, but the name of one is better-known, its price may be higher than the other; but it is said of those who buy the more expensive product that they are "paying for the name"; and either that they are fools, or that they are acting through ignorance, through being unaware that the same goods may be bought more cheaply elsewhere. It is an example of a consumer's

choice which the economist calls "irrational," or an "imperfect market"; it is not pretended that the name makes identical goods of a different value, or that anything is of greater importance than the actual quality of what is offered for sale. Why is an exception made in any instance? Champagne is good; but if its quality were to fall below that of a cheaper wine, the glamor and reputation of its name ought not to allow it to maintain its price.

It is therefore necessary in the end to accept one or other of the conclusions which was intended by Han: either certain of his pictures are of a standard equal to Vermeer, or else the experts and the connoisseurs are hopelessly incompetent in their duties, relying solely upon superficial evidence, the opinion of one of their number who has gained a reputation. Did anyone say of any of van Meegeren's own pictures—any of the countless canvases painted over twenty-five years above his own name—that it bore the imprint of genius? Did anyone come forward in eight years and propose that the *Emmaus* did not? Was this then a great coincidence that he should produce this solitary masterpiece? Is it, indeed, a coincidence that many have denied the greatness of his forgeries since their authorship became known in 1945—but no one before that date? Yet if it be admitted that the critics in the first place were right; if in fact these forgeries were indistinguishable from the work of a great master, who has been defrauded and with what justification can damages be claimed? There seems now little doubt that the later

forgeries fall below the standard of the first, though they were sold at a higher price; does this indicate anything beyond the absence of discrimination on the part of the purchasers? No easy task has been given to those Dutch officials who must determine the value of the pictures then and now.

To all these questions of high finance, the van Mee-geren family, living in poverty in Amsterdam, remain supremely indifferent. They know that there are many who believe that the money should remain in their possession; that Han defrauded fools and that *they* should be penalized; that the claims of the State are unjust. At the same time they are perfectly aware that they will never receive any part of what remains; that there can never be assets to cover the liabilities which will be officially admitted. When at last Han's trial began, he was simply accused of forging signatures; he was awarded a prison sentence as a law-breaker but was not at the same time ordered to repay all or part of his remaining fortune. This would be a separate matter, and each of those who had paid for the pictures must claim damages accordingly. As early as November, 1945—two years before his sentence—the first petition was filed against him; this was by the Netherlands State and the Rotterdam Bank and amounted to about a million and a half dollars. Other petitions followed and a meeting of creditors took place in February, 1947. All these claims are still being considered; they were irrelevant at the trial, where Han's guilt was the only interest.

Chapter XIII

ON THE morning of 29th October, 1947, Han left in good time his home on the Keizergracht. He was hunched and haggard, his face lined, his heart weary and tired to death, his frail body only kept alive by an immense desire to condemn and justify himself. He set out to walk to the courtroom, where since dawn his arrival had been awaited; as he left, reporters jostled him, photographers flashed their cameras; *curse* these people (he thought) who never left him alone, who intruded each day into his private life, who accosted him in the street or knocked at his door, and refused to go away till their damn-fool questions had been answered! But he knew they were necessary to his cause; that it was through them that the world would hear of his achievement, which he desired more than anything; he would help them in every way, would assume the jaunty and debonair manner which would appeal to them. And his friends, as he met them in the street, he greeted as though this were any other morning: the barmen and

the *concierges*, the laborers and the police, the working men of the city who loved and admired him, who always remembered his kindness. "A good fellow, whatever else he may be"—it was with these words that they spoke of him, as they watched him thread his way through the busy street, disappear round the corner, and head towards the Prinsengracht. Here, in the Fourth Chamber of the District Assize Court, every seat was occupied; by representatives of the world press, by those who had been involved in the case, by admirers of Han and by those who detested him, by strangers who had queued to secure admission. All had come to see this strange little man, whose name for so long had been on every lip; who had once been poor, who had lived for eight years as a prince and king; who was now a bankrupt, facing a prison sentence, extinction and humility. For of course everyone agreed; he would be found guilty, he would be proved to have painted the pictures, everyone would have their say and Han would be convicted. It was a foregone conclusion; the argument which raged was a different one: was he thus disgraced or did he disgrace the world? What would his conviction prove? That he was a charlatan—or genius? That he had perpetrated a series of disgraceful frauds, to benefit himself—or that he had planned simply to discredit a corrupt and incompetent system. That the forging of a series of "Vermeers" was nothing to prove his artistic talent—or that he had shown himself the master of a new and original art, requiring its own particular genius and in which he had never been sur-

passed? These were the questions which had been argued over and over again, in cafés and clubs ever since his confession; today they were no nearer solution. In the eyes of the law he would be condemned and convicted; but nobody was sure what that would prove.

Han himself had not the slightest doubt; he was perfectly convinced of the outcome he desired. Indeed the trial is perhaps unique, in that the hopes and fears of the defendant and his accusers were precisely the opposite to those usually expected. The defendant faced a sentence of perhaps ten years, the forfeiture of an immense fortune; yet he had desired nothing more in his life than that he should be found guilty. Yet those who would give evidence against him would give evidence against themselves; his dupes relied on his conviction to secure the return of some part of the fortunes they had paid; but this would imply that they were unworthy of the positions they held in the artistic world: fools who had judged by a name, who had relied upon the judgment of others, who had fallen from the pedestal of artistic knowledge on which they had set themselves. It is certain that Han wished to prove himself guilty; it is hard to imagine that those who gave evidence were pleased at the prospect of convicting themselves, though before the Court it would appear that they were condemning an enemy. More than anything, it was this unusual aspect of the case which fascinated and intrigued the spectators.

The courtroom itself has a strange appearance. On its walls are the nine pictures which Han has painted:

the six "Vermeers" and the two "de Hoochs" which he sold, and the seventh "Vermeer," the *Young Christ*, which he made after his confession before judicial witnesses. A screen has been set across the chamber, on which will be projected the photographic evidence of the internal committee which is to announce its findings; members of the committee will make the opening statements; they will announce the results of their long examination, and will say if Han's claims are technically possible. They will be followed by those who were concerned in the transactions, who will present their accounts of their own deception; the Public Prosecutor will make his statement, wherein Han's fault will be formally exposed. There are many questions to which answers are awaited; will they be provided today, or will the trial fall below the hopes of its assistants?

"Are you Henricus Antonius van Meegeren?" The President of the Court, Mr. V. G. A. Boll, puts the formal question as Han enters the dock; he nods his head, an official reads the indictment. He is accused of forging signatures: "Do you admit the charge?"

"Yes."

"Then let us hear the opinions of the experts."

The lights in the courtroom are dimmed for the showing of photographic evidence. Dr. Coremans, the Belgian expert who heads the committee, is the principal commentator. The photographs displayed are X-rays of the pictures: some of the forgeries have been cut into sections, and large-scale enlargements show the result of this operation: the truly old paint from the

remains of the originals can be discerned between the canvas and Han's covering. The X-rays show for the first time the outlines of the paintings underneath; in some they can hardly be discerned, in others they stand out clearly. Dr. Coremans gives the findings of the committee; he explains the technique which in his opinion was used; by comparing photographs, he shows the essential differences between genuinely old paintings and their modern counterfeits.

"Do you accept the evidence of the witness?" Han is asked.

"Yes."

"Have you any questions to put to him?"

"No. But I should like to say that I find these tests amazingly clever. It seems to me that it is much more clever to carry out a test of this kind, than to paint a Rembrandt for example. That would be relatively simple."

Spectators smile, they are delighted by this fellow as he hoped they would be delighted, they sit back to enjoy themselves; why in the world were these X-ray tests not demanded by purchasers at the time of sale? Who was responsible? Who was fooled by them? Would they give evidence? How would they explain? Here is the next witness, Dr. A. W. de Wild; what will he add to the testimony of his predecessor?

Dr. de Wild, second member of the international committee, has written several text books on artistic methods; it has already been mentioned that Han studied his work and derived some help from it.

"For me these tests were less difficult," he states; "for it soon became clear to me that the defendant borrowed a formula for the composition of his quasi-oil paints from my treatise on the subject of the methods of Vermeer. Even certain blemishes which are found in originals were copied by van Meegeren in his work."

The Public Prosecutor puts the question all are asking: "How do you account for the fact that the original tests were negative, but after these later examinations every expert agrees that the paintings are inauthentic?"

The doctor's reply satisfies no one:

"Because the art dealer de Boer refused twice to allow X-ray photographs to be taken of those van Meegerens which he had in his keeping. Such a test would have certainly shown that the paintings were not genuine."

But *why* did de Boer refuse? *Why* should he object if he believed them authentic? And what about the others concerned in the business—were *they* not interested in a more positive proof? And the other pictures, which never passed through de Boer's hands; did no other agent desire this elementary precaution? Did no purchaser insist upon more certain evidence? How is it possible to imagine that any should be so reckless with their millions! Yet these questions remain unanswered; replies are never given; the Court holds that the gullibility of fools is of no interest and not at all mitigating; the only essential evidence is that in fact the transactions took place.

The agent Strijbis is called.

"I was already acquainted with van Meegeren,"—he tells the Court, "when he asked me, in 1941, to sell a small seventeenth century painting. It was a *Head of Christ* by Vermeer. I went to the art-dealer Hoogendijk who bought it for \$120,000."

"Did you know that it was forged?"

"Certainly not. Van Meegeren said it was a Vermeer. He never told me where he had found it. I sold three others for van Meegeren to Hoogendijk: the *Last Supper*, a Pieter de Hooch, and the *Blessing of Jacob*. I no longer remember the prices paid; I kept no record."

He never told him where he found it! And he no longer remembers the prices paid. Yet even the de Hooch fetched \$117,000, and the total involved was some millions of guilders. How strangely careless some fellows can be! So think the spectators; and they take a look at Han, who throughout the hearing sits quietly in his corner, at times a smile playing about his face, his expression showing sometimes interest, sometimes boredom; yet always alive, eager for the admissions which he knows must come, intent above all upon enforcing them. He knows that, next, Hoogendijk will be called; and that will be good; Hoogendijk, whose reputation in Holland is second to none, the kind of fellow he has always fought against for thirty years—what will Hoogendijk say to excuse himself?

Give him credit, he says nothing.

"I was fooled," he admits at once. "When I saw the *Head of Christ*, it made me think so strongly of the *Emmaus* that I was deceived."

"Did you not think it strange," is the President's expected question, "that, after this one, more Vermeers were discovered?"

"No. The historians agree that there should be more Vermeers, and that the *Emmaus* could not be the only one of its kind in existence. I sold the *Head of Christ* to Mr. D. G. van Beuningen for \$165,000. That was in 1941, in Rotterdam."

"How about the rest?"

"Van Beuningen also bought the *Last Supper*. My first impression was that this was an extraordinary painting. My first impression is often the best, but I again allowed myself to be influenced by the *Emmaus*. It seems beyond understanding now; at the time, you know, all was done secretly. After the *Supper* I sold two more paintings, including the strange one, the *Blessing of Jacob*."

"How do you account for your acceptance of that one?"

Hoogendijk turns to have one more look at the painting in question, which hangs with the others on the courtroom walls.

"Yes," he agrees, "it's difficult to explain. It is unbelievable that it should have fooled me. But we slid downwards—from the *Emmaus* to the *Foot-Washing*, and from the *Foot-Washing* to the *Blessing of Jacob*; a psychologist could explain this better than I can. But the atmosphere of war contributed to our blindness."

Mr. E. Helderling, van Meegeren's lawyer, asks a question.

"How about the pretended origins of these paintings? Was it not said that they came from a Countess, who had received them as a family heirloom?"

"No," replies Hoogendijk. "No Countess was mentioned. There was only some talk of an old Dutch family."

His further evidence is not required. It is clear that he has simply been deceived. He compared the later van Meegerens with the earlier van Meegerens; he depended for his belief that they were Vermeers upon nothing more than this fallible judgment. He did not bother to find where they had come from; he leaves it to a psychologist to account for his deception. A psychologist is the next witness; but he is not concerned with Hoogendijk. He is the learned Dr. L. van der Horst, who has prepared an analysis.

"The character of this defendant," he states, "leads to sensitiveness to criticism, fed by a revenge complex which explains his anti-social attitude. Mentally I must say that he is responsible for his actions; and without doubt he is an excellent craftsman." *

The court adjourns for lunch after this fair summing-up, the best to be given by any of the experts. After an hour's interval, the examination of witnesses continues; the next is the dealer de Boer, who sold to the State the *Washing of Christ's Feet*. He is examined by the President.

* The Dutch words are; *critiekloosheid* (sensitiveness to criticism); *rancuneuze instelling* (revenge complex); and *toerekeningsvatbaar* (responsible for his actions).

"In 1943 I was visited by a Mr. Kok," he begins. "He offered to sell me an old painting."

"Did he tell you the name of the artist?"

"He said I would be able to tell that right away. When he showed me the painting, I saw at once that it was by the same Master who painted the *Emmaus*. I added that probably it was unsigned. Then I examined the canvas more carefully, and saw the signature of Johannes Vermeer?"

"Did you yourself have doubts?"

"None."

"What happened to the picture?"

"It was sold to the State."

"Call Mr. Kok."

Jan Kok was intermediary between van Meegeren and de Boer; he received \$24,000 for his work, which he later repaid.

"I was told by van Meegeren that he found the picture in an old collection. He thought it would be worth three hundred thousand dollars. I undertook the transaction but refused a large reward—not through suspicion but because I thought it was too high."

He refused a large reward, but accepted \$24,000. Did he mention to de Boer that he had received the picture from Han? If so, why was he employed by the artist? Would Han be ready to pay \$24,000 to avoid the physical effort of visiting de Boer? If not, did Jan Kok pretend that he himself had found the picture "in an old collection?" Did he not then wonder why Han wished that his name should not be mentioned? Did he not

ask why this should be the case? Or suspect that there was something "going on"? These are a few questions never asked; now they can be asked in vain. The President turned to the next witness, who refers to the same painting from the buyer's end.

Dr. D. Hannema, director during the war of the Boymans Museum, tells the Court that in 1943 he was rung up by the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. This is the city's municipal gallery, where the pictures are still impounded. The Rijksmuseum told Dr. Hannema that an interesting picture had been found in Amsterdam; would he come and see it, and give his opinion?

"I went to Amsterdam and was at once impressed that this was a Vermeer," he says. "It was inspected by a Government Committee, who decided to advise its purchase."

And the Doctor makes a strange admission.

"None of us liked it very much," he adds. "But we were afraid that it would be sold to Germany."

At once he is questioned by the President.

"But you also bought it for its artistic value?"

"Certainly. After all, Vermeers are scarce."

"And the price paid?"

"It was finally fixed at \$351,000.*

"Was there no talk about the origin of the picture?"

"Yes, but it was all very vague."

Here was a witness who delighted Han beyond any other. The State's buying committee did not *like* the picture; but they bought it for over three hundred

* Plus agent's commission, \$39,000; see chapter IX, page 177.

thousand. They did not think that it was a *good* picture; but they believed that it was a Vermeer. Or at least they thought that it *might* be a Vermeer; and a superficial examination was all that was required. Now it was proved that it was indeed a forgery; the same tests, in 1943, could have had the same results. If any inquiries were made of the history of the picture, they were "very vague." Why in the world, Han thought—as he had thought at the time on each occasion—*were* they so vague? Was it not an ordinary precaution to inquire how the picture had been found? Or was none interested in discovering its history since Vermeer completed it? How often, then, had this happened before—with other paintings forged by other hands? How often would it happen again? Was it a common occurrence, or entirely due to war conditions, that a State department should pay this sum for a painting it admittedly "did not like"? And of course it was a frank admission that they were "paying for the name;" that they were interested in the picture in the first place, and paid such a price for it, simply because they believed that it was painted by Vermeer, even though it was a bad example of his work; and even though they admitted it was a bad one, they took no extra care, but less than would be expected in any event, in assuring themselves of its authenticity.

So he had won his case. It would be proved that he was guilty; but it had been proved already that the experts were incompetent. Han hardly listened as two of the final purchasers told their stories. They had believed

the stories told by the dealers. They had never doubted. The stories had seemed very plausible. They had paid so many thousands for this, so many thousands for that. Thousands upon thousands. Han no longer cared. He was uninterested in the trial. He had achieved, he thought, his own particular greatness. Words went on; Han was dreaming about himself. He knew there was no future left. His life's work was done; he felt through **his weariness an exultancy**, there was nothing now left for him to do. Soon he would die; but he would be unforgotten: "the great artist van Meegeren"? Thus? Or "the criminal"?—Only by fools. But this was no satisfaction. What *would* happen then, what *might* happen **after death—useless**. It was *now* that his moment had arrived; now, at this moment of time, at the height of success; what is life? A struggle to achieve an end; why? The end is achieved, yet brings no joy; there is no conscious appreciation that it has been achieved; the moment passes, death. *Glory in it, now!* There is nothing more in life.

Yet he was tired.

Dreams. The President was calling his name.

"You agree that you painted these forgeries?"

"Yes, Mr. President."

"And also that you sold them, at a very high price?"

"I was compelled to. Had I sold them at a low price, they would have been believed at once to have been forged."

"But you continued, did you not, after the first forgery?"

"I enjoyed painting them so much. One comes to a condition in which one is no more master of oneself. You become without will, powerless. I was forced to continue."

"At least you made a considerable profit."

"I had to. I had been so belittled by the critics that I could no longer exhibit anywhere. I was systematically damaged by the critics, who knew not a thing about art."

"But perhaps the financial advantage had some kind of influence on your actions."

"It made little difference. The millions I earned from the later pictures were added to the millions I had earned before."

"Did you act from a desire to benefit?"

"Only from a desire to paint. I decided to carry on, not primarily from a desire to paint forgeries, but to make the best use of the technique which I discovered."

It is finished. There is nothing more to be said. The trial has lasted for a few hours; a hundred questions remain unanswered. The *Emmaus*, the first and greatest of the series, has hardly been mentioned; nothing has been said of the *Adulteress*, no witness has been pressed with questions he would rather not answer, there is but one accused. His guilt is proved. Out of court, the wrangling will continue. The Public Prosecutor makes his final speech. He says everything that would be expected; he underlines those matters which Han himself would have emphasized. Some-

times, it is true, he uses a different emphasis; he puts a point of view with which others disagree. "He considered none but himself"—himself and the thousands who share his views. "Art has been besmirched"—or has its corruption been revealed? "He was impelled undoubtedly by his desire for money"—not undoubtedly, and it is a weakness of the world. Yet it was not hard to secure Han's conviction. Despite everything, that was what all desired.

So it happened that, in the late afternoon, the trial ended; counsel demanded that Han should be sentenced to two years' imprisonment and it was stated that the findings of the court would be announced at a later sitting. But Han was little interested in the sentence. He believed that he would not survive even a year—the minimum he could expect—in jail. He left the dock, shuffled into his coat and hat, left the courtroom; and the hunched figure walked slowly and alone, back to his mansion on the Keizergracht.

Chapter XIV

A FORTNIGHT later, at a special court sitting, Han was found guilty and was sentenced to imprisonment for a year. His ill health was one reason for the lightness of his sentence.

He was old and broken. When a great ambition is within sight of achievement, a man can continue beyond his usual powers. Who has not known, when the purpose is of sufficient importance, that he can apply himself, without rest or refreshment, till the end? How, when at last it is over, the accumulated and forgotten weariness bears down upon his head insupportably?

So Han now found. He returned home and awaited prison. Days passed and no one came for him. A month went by. Each morning, Han expected that he would be in his cell by nightfall. This was a day-to-day existence, and an intolerable one; his exhaustion, and the emptiness which succeeds when an end is reached, deprived Han of any desire to make use of these last days as otherwise he would have wished.

For it was thus that Han thought of them. A year's imprisonment? That at least was a compliment, a token of sympathy, the least penalty it was possible he should receive. But practically it made no difference. A year in prison, or ten years; he knew he could never live through it, whatever the length of term. Among friends, with amenities to which he was accustomed, with the comforts of the life he had led, its interests and stimulants—thus, perhaps, after a rest and a forgetting, he might have lived on, might have begun to paint again—his own pictures, now the height of fashion, a still life, sometimes an interior, a group—leisurely, at peace, in the fullness of time. But for Han there was no such period of rest; only each day he waited: he walked about the streets, he had freedom of action, he went each evening to his favorite café; everywhere there were friends, who admired without pitying, who were proud of their acquaintance with this little man, who by his own strength, and despite his weakness, had forced himself to be great.

But he wanted now to die.

He saw no doctor. He drank more heavily and slept little. Friends and family, aware of his frailty, and remembering his collapse of the previous year, were able to do nothing. Soon before Christmas he collapsed again; he was taken to an Amsterdam hospital, dangerously ill. Doctors again ordered complete rest; in the hospital's enforced quiet he seemed to make progress: he became more at peace with himself, able to think more clearly, to look for a moment beyond his

240]

own death. He received occasional visitors, for short periods only; there was usually a nurse present. His son Jacques came for a brief visit whenever he was allowed.

His family—what would become of them? There was nothing left for them; all was gone. Jo, he supposed—he felt no bitterness—would manage somehow; he had provided for her at the time of the divorce; what of the children, of Inez and Jacques? What of Anna?

The ninth picture. Han remembered the ninth picture. Not the *Young Christ*; the picture he had painted—who knows when?—and had afterwards hidden—who knows where and to what purpose? Jacques would be coming for his daily visit; he must confide in him the fact of its existence, its hiding place, his last Vermeer; perhaps if he were to find it. . . . When next he was alone with his son, he began to tell the story; they had a minute together: "It is hidden between two pieces of plywood. . . ." A nurse returned, he could not continue; "Come again tomorrow, I will tell you."

Tomorrow and tomorrow; it was almost the New Year. Towards the evening, Han grew suddenly weaker, collapsed the third time; now he could find no desire to fight, there was death, the ending of sensation, nothing beyond death, dust, there was nothing beyond death; he had lived, he had finished his work, he no longer desired to resist, there was no reason for a struggle; he was great, he knew that he was great.

What fools they had been!

Han van Meegeren died the thirtieth December, 1947.

[Continued from front flap]

tors found the 'Adultress' among Goering's collection in Berchtesgaden. A written record of its sale existed..." Here was a great Dutch treasure which had been sold to the hated Nazis—sold by a Dutchman—obviously by a collaborator. "The Dutch people was out to find its traitors, and once a suspicion has been awoken, that was practically enough. More than any other, the collaborator was hated and despised; more than any other he was sought out now by a rightly vindictive populace..."

Han van Meegeren had never been the slightest interested in politics. But he made the mistake of telling the police that he had bought the painting from an impoverished Italian family whose name he could not reveal. That settled it. He was obviously a collaborator and had done some favor for the Fascists. They had repaid him by giving him this great Dutch treasure. And he, instead of giving it to a Dutch museum, had sold it to his friends the Germans!

It was quite vain for him to explain that Goering never paid in cash, but instead returned more than 200 Dutch paintings—all genuine—which had been removed from the country. The investigators were trained. They were thorough. And they broke him down.

He burst out his confession. "I sold no Vermeer to the Germans! I sold no treasure! I painted the picture myself!"

The experts who had spoken in praise of his work naturally tried to keep this news from leaking out—their reputations were at stake. It would be plain either that they were ignorant, or that this unrecognized van Meegeren was really as good as Vermeer. ... Then the newspapers got hold of it, and for two years Han van Meegeren supplied them with front-page copy.

Here in this book is the whole bizarre story. John Godley did the research and wrote it up at the request of the van Meegeren family. There had been enough rumor. Now let the truth be told. ...

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY



128 226

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY